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Tell Tale-Tit

by

Bessie Marchant

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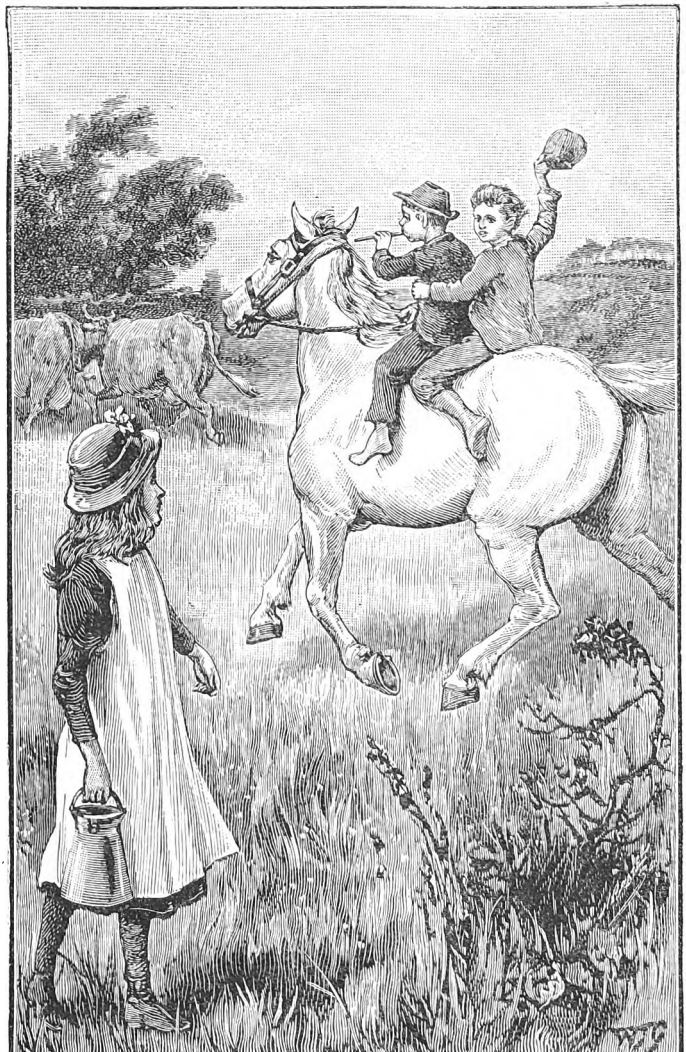

"They called it buffalo hunting."—*Page 14.*

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TELL-TALE-TIT.

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT

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CONTENTS.

Chapter		*Page*
I.	THE RABBIT'S BLUNDER	7
II.	MAMIE THE SCAPEGOAT	17
III.	FOR GOOD FELLOWSHIP	26
IV.	AN UNLUCKY RIDE	36
V.	TRUTH-TELLING UNDER DIFFICULTIES	47
VI.	AWKWARD QUESTIONS	57
VII.	W. H.	67
VIII.	THE NEW MISTRESS	78
IX.	THE HAUNTING TEMPTATION	90
X.	THE FLIGHT	100
XI.	UNDER A CLOUD	108
XII.	TRUTH TRIUMPHANT	118

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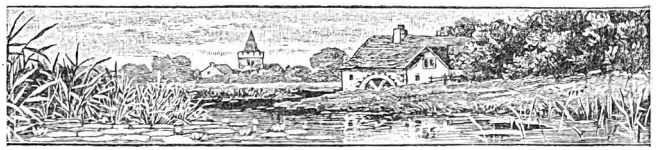

TELL-TALE-TIT.

CHAPTER I.

THE RABBIT'S BLUNDER.

"Tell-tale-tit, she shall have her tongue slit,
And every barking puppy dog
Shall have a little bit."

THE shrieking chorus of angry children swept nearer and nearer, and Mamie Dodds hastened her flying steps as she rushed along Rocker's Crescent, in the hope of gaining the safe harbourage of her own back garden.

But alas, and alas, the door of No. 37 was fast locked, when she dashed in at the open garden gate, and tried the handle in frantic haste. In vain she rattled, and hammered, and shook, the door showed no more sign of coming open, than the house of coming down; while the children had turned the corner,

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and were already in sight, coming past the carpenter's shop at the lower end of the crescent.

Out of the gate she dashed again, in full sight of her pursuers, making a bid for safety in flight, since her city of refuge was barred against her.

"There she goes, Tell-tale-tit, sneak, spy, spoil-sport," shrieked the enraged juveniles who were following hot on her trail, and then blending their voices in unison, whilst their flying feet kept time, they began again:

> "Tell-tale-tit, she shall have her tongue slit,
> And every barking puppy dog
> Shall have a little bit."

Mamie was almost winded with her run; she was not so well-fed and sturdy as some of the children who were hunting her down, while there was a funny humming noise in her ears which bewildered her, and a sharp pain in her side, warning her that she could not keep her present pace many minutes longer. But to stop where she was meant falling into the hands of her enemies, and that she was resolved not to do, if by any effort she could avoid it.

Round the corner she dashed, past the little

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house with green blinds, and brass knocker, where Miss Fillingham lived, and was mentally calculating her chances of holding out until she could reach the next turning leading to Bexley mill, when an open door in the wall leading to Miss Fillingham's garden presented itself to her view, and darting in, she banged it behind her, and was safe.

Down on the ground she dropped, sitting on the gravel with her back against the door, which had so luckily presented a place of refuge.

It took her ten minutes or so to recover the breath she had lost, and to rub out with one grubby little hand the sharp pain that had settled under the left side of her still grubbier pinafore, during which she heard the children tear past in full cry, returning a little later, baffled and angry, because the scent had failed, and their victim had escaped for the time.

Then, when the pain had dulled a little, and she could breathe with comfort, she began reflecting on the bitter injustice of it all, growing hot and resentful at first, but finally subsiding in a great burst of pitiful weeping, which made her thin little face more streaky and smudgy than it was before.

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And, after all, she had done nothing bad, that they should hate her so, those strong hearty children whose mothers gave them unstinted bread and lard, with luscious slices of treacle-pudding, and baked pig-meat for Sundays.

She had only told the truth, the veriest, most indisputable fact. And even this had not been volunteered, but dragged from her unwilling lips by Jonathan West, who, after all, had a right to know, since he was the owner of the horse that had been lamed.

Try as she would, she could find no fault of which she could convict herself in the matter, and the fact only made her weep the more. For it is not nice to be a martyr, when the martyrdom must be endured alone; and there was nothing heroic about Mamie Dodds, she being just a common-place little girl with a torn frock, and a dingy pinafore. One, moreover, who had no mother to love her, and whose father had a habit of wandering from "The Blue Pig" to "The Yellow Stag," and thence round by other similar places of entertainment, sampling the liquors supplied by each, at his own expense, and delivering his opinion upon their respective merits.

Pondering upon her wrongs, Mamie wept,

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and wept until it seemed almost wonderful where all the tears could come from, and still there was no sign of their fount being exhausted, when there was a sound of a window being opened somewhere, and then a gentle voice asked:

"What are you crying for, little girl?"

Mamie started in sudden recollection, all this time she had forgotten that she was upon forbidden ground, and the sound of the voice reminded her that she was sitting on Miss Fillingham's garden path, whilst the lady herself was asking the cause of the weeping.

"I—I think it's too—too bad," she sobbed, summing up the situation with quite judicial clearness to herself at least.

"What is too bad?" demanded Miss Fillingham, in those crisp, brisk tones of hers.

"They are all too bad," retorted Mamie, flinging up her head with a gesture of defiance. "I shouldn't never have said nothing if Mr. West hadn't asked me. But seeing he did, I had to say the truth because I promised mother before she died I'd always say it, come what might."

Miss Fillingham drew in her head with

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a quick gesture—but then most of her movements were rapid—and calling to Mamie to stay where she was, disappeared from view momentarily.

Mamie had ceased crying now, and was staring pathetically at a cluster of tall hollyhocks that lifted flaunting heads of pink and crimson, to crow over the fuchsias and geraniums, that could not climb so near to heaven. She was not seeing the hollyhocks, nor even regarding the bees that droned in and out, shaking the tall stems as they arrived or departed with a bounce and a jerk, but her mental revision was still going on, though now her thinking was tinged with quite a bitter resentment against Jonathan West, he being indirectly the whole cause of the trouble.

Miss Fillingham appeared again at the little French window of her dining-room, and, unfastening it, stepped out into the September sunshine beside Mamie Dodds.

"Are you the little girl from No. 37?" asked the lady, a certain note of compassion stirring in her tone, for that house had already gained a most unenviable notoriety in the crescent, and Miss Fillingham, as the owner of the houses felt some measure of responsibility in the matter.

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"Yes, ma'am, I'm Mamie Dodds," replied the child, turning her sad eyes upwards to gaze into the face of the energetic little lady, into whose garden she had trespassed.

"Tell me about it. The truth, mind you, just as you told it to Mr. Jonathan West," commanded Miss Fillingham, seating herself upon the garden-roller, whilst Mamie retained her old position upon the gravel.

"They are hunting for me now, they will beat me if they can find me; Tom Piper says that he will thrash me until I am blind and silly too," sobbed the child with a swift return of her old misery.

"I don't think he will. Or if he does, he may have to be a very sorry boy for having done it. I know Tom Piper, and—I—do—not—like—him," the lady replied, speaking the last words with slow deliberation, that did but add to their impressiveness.

Mamie drew a sharp breath of relief; if Miss Fillingham was prepared to stand by her, she might yet escape the worst consequences of her truth-telling.

"What did you tell Mr. West?" the lady urged again, intent on getting to the bottom of the matter.

"It was about his horse that fell lame four

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days ago; it is pastured on the moors with Sam Rawlings's cows. When I have gone across the moors to fetch the milk, I've often seen Jimmy Bent and Tom Piper riding the horse, and making it chase the cows. They called it buffalo hunting, and used to shoot at the cows with pea-poppers."

"I dare say, what next, I wonder?" ejaculated Miss Fillingham in an irascible tone, for Sam Rawlings was her tenant, and somewhat of a protégé likewise, seeing that she had lent him the money to buy the cows, whose peace of mind, and digestion, had been harried by naughty boys armed with pea-poppers.

"And last Monday," continued Mamie, "as I was coming back with the milk, I saw them both upon the horse, they were trying to make it jump the ditch, they had big sticks, and they hit it hard blows, I could hear them quite plain, though I was away at the other end of the meadow by the stile. Then the horse backed, and turned, but they dragged its head round and shouted to make it go on. And then the next thing I saw, it put its foot down in a rabbit hole, and falling on its knees, toppled them over its head into the ditch."

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"A most righteous retribution truly," exclaimed Miss Fillingham, in a tone of great and thorough satisfaction.

"The horse was very much hurt," continued Mamie, with the quiver of a returning sob in her voice. "Mr. West has had to ask the veterinary surgeon to come and see it, and it will cost a lot of money to make its leg well again. Then Mr. West stopped me yesterday, because he knows I go across the moors for milk, to ask if I knew how it was done; and then I had to tell him everything," here words failed her for the time, and she could only sob.

"Yes, well, go on," commanded Miss Fillingham curtly; not being much given to tears herself, she lacked sympathy for those who were.

"Mr. West was very angry, and wrote to tell Mr. Piper and Mr. Bent what the boys had done, saying they'd have to pay the surgeon's bill, and the hire of another horse, or he'd have the law on them. Then it came out who had told, and I daren't show my face in the street because all the children take the part of Tom and Jimmy, and say that I'd no right to tell, and they say it wasn't the fault of the boys at all, but it was the

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rabbit that was to blame for making a hole in that place."

"Ah, well, if it comes to a question of original sin, I'm very much afraid we shall both get out of our depth, Mamie," said the lady with a ripple of laughter in her tones.

"Was it the rabbit's fault, ma'am?" inquired the child, looking at the lady with those strangely wistful eyes of her.

"The rabbit blundered certainly, for you see it might have chosen some other place, but then it did not know that the horse was going to put a foot down into its parlour, and the horse did not know that those naughty boys would want to ride on its back two at once, and—but there, it is too much like the house that Jack built, for us to speculate about it any more. Come indoors, child, and I will give you some rice pudding," Miss Fillingham said, as she rose from her seat on the garden-roller.

And Mamie obeyed with great alacrity.

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CHAPTER II.

MAMIE THE SCAPEGOAT.

IKEY DODDS—his baptismal appellation was Isaac—was a cloth-dresser at Bexley mill, earning good wages when he chose to work, but oftener he preferred to loaf about from public-house to public-house, earning no money at all; and then it was, that food and firing became scanty, and hard to come by in the little household of No. 37, Rocker's Crescent.

He was a widower with one child—Mamie, and living with them, to take care of the house, mend and wash the clothes, and cook the dinners, was an elderly widowed cousin of Ikey's, a woman named Mrs. Clayton, fat and greasy of aspect, and very much given to sitting still in her chair wrapped in profound meditation.

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Her house-keeping was not very effectual, if one might judge from the appearance presented by No. 37, the dirty windows, and dingy blinds of which, showed in strong contrast to the spick-and-span cleanliness of the houses on either side.

Nor did Mamie's appearance reflect any more credit upon her, for the child's clothing was ragged, old, and dirty, too thick in summer, too thin in the winter, while she had rarely a tidy pair of shoes to her feet, not even when her father kept steadily to his work.

The people in Rocker's Crescent prided themselves not a little on their extreme respectability; all the windows—saving those of No. 37—had white lace curtains, one or two of the houses even contained pianos, the fortunate possessors of which, tinkled forth rival melodies on summer evenings, with a maddening disregard of time or tune, or anything else, except the chance of out-playing each other. And as was only natural, such highly respectable people strongly resented the intrusion into their midst of "low-class folks like that Ikey Dodds and his lot."

A deputation of the tenants had even waited on Miss Fillingham to ask that she would give the man notice to quit. At this, however, she

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demurred, her agent had let the house to Ikey Dodds, and she could not in justice turn him out unless he did something to merit dismissal.

"But this I will do," she said in her crisp tones, surveying the six men forming the deputation who were carefully balancing themselves upon the edges of her six parlour chairs, whilst she faced them, seated upon the music stool. "If he does anything that I can complain of, such as coming home riotously drunk, and making a disturbance in the crescent, or if he gets summoned before the magistrates, then I promise you I will speedily clear him out of the house, but until such a thing should happen, I am afraid there is nothing for it but to have patience; meanwhile I will tell my agent, that for the future, he must be more careful to whom he lets the houses."

With this the deputation were fain to be content, and they filed out of the house with respectful leave-takings of their landlady.

But once outside in the pleasant warmth of the September gloaming, they threshed the matter out among themselves, and resolved that sooner or later—sooner if possible, they would make Rocker's Crescent too hot for

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Ikey Dodds to live in. Meanwhile the matter might safely be left in the hands of their respective wives, and smoking their pipes of peace the six dispersed, each man sauntering homewards in great content with himself and his neighbours, saving and except the man Ikey Dodds.

This resolution of the deputation had been arrived at just one week before the accident to Jonathan West's poor horse, and the pursuit and persecution of Mamie had been the first result of their unanimous decision to scorch Ikey Dodds out of Rocker's Crescent.

But unfortunately for their operations in this direction, Miss Fillingham had taken the poor neglected child under her own especial protection, a state of things as unexpected as it was displeasing to them all.

They could not gainsay it, however, and hostilities ceased without delay, in consequence of which Mamie suffered nothing at the hands of her juvenile neighbours, saving averted looks and plentiful cold-shoulder.

This did not trouble her much, for she had never been accustomed to much companionship, and whilst the September days were sunny and warm, and she had the liberty to spend them in wandering about in the fields

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or by the river, her life knew no lack, and she felt herself at peace with all the world.

Then school opened, and the other children were promptly caught, caged, and confined for a certain number of hours in every day, but Mamie wandered still, her shoes were worse than ever, of her stockings little remained but the legs, and the old velveteen dress Mrs. Clayton had purchased for her at the pawnshop, was reduced almost to a bundle of shreds from persistent nutting and blackberrying.

Time enough for her to go to school next week, or the week after, Mrs. Clayton said, after prolonged meditation on the subject, and Mamie was quite content to have it so, for the moors were lovely in the hot autumn noontides, and there was boundless happiness to be enjoyed by merely lying on the grass, and looking up into the sky.

Next week, and the week after slipped by, but Mrs. Clayton was meditating on the subject still, and Mamie was content that her ruminations should go on undisturbed, whilst Ikey Dodds, who happened to be more steadily at work than usual, never gave the item of schooling a thought.

Now was the opportunity of Rocker's Crescent, and they seized it with avidity.

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A quiet word to the school-attendance officer, a few more quiet words to members of the committee, who sat once a month in the board-room at the workhouse, and lo, the train was laid which was to lead to the explosion, which should expel Ikey Dodds from the highly-respectable purlieus of Rocker's Crescent.

Meanwhile Mamie, the poor little scapegoat who was to suffer for her father's sins against respectability, wandered on unchecked. True, the nights and the mornings were growing chilly, and the yawning rents in the velveteen dress let in more cold than was altogether desirable, but even that was better than school and the averted looks of the children who should have been her playmates, so Mamie swung her arms to keep herself warm, and wished in vain for summer once again.

The school-attendance officer had fulminated his thunder-bolts and launched them at No. 37, Rocker's Crescent, but Mrs. Clayton just glanced through them and put them into the fire, after which she continued her ruminations, and Mamie received no orders to go to school.

With the coming of the wet weather she had to stay indoors, and the housewifely

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instinct within her, stirred into active life under pressure of the confinement, urging her to sweep, and scrub, and scour, with more zeal than discretion: so that Mrs. Clayton came out of her meditations to complain fretfully of the dust choking her; and then objected in language more forceful than polite, to the puddles of dirty water remaining on the floor, after Mamie had tried her 'prentice hand at scrubbing it clean, only to succeed in rendering it worse than it was before.

The time for the committee meeting came and passed, and Rocker's Crescent waited breathlessly for the bursting of the bomb. Miss Fillingham was away visiting in the north, but she was expected home shortly, by which time if the hopes of her tenants were realized matters would be in train for her to make good her promise, and give that low fellow Ikey Dodds notice to quit.

And events fell out according to their desires, which is not a common occurrence in this world of disappointment. And Ikey Dodds was summoned to appear before the magistrates for not sending his child to school.

As the summons was served upon Ikey in person, Mrs. Clayton lacked the opportunity of burning that document, and had to bear

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instead the very violent reproaches of her enraged cousin for letting him into it in this fashion, he winding up these same reproaches by declaring that since he had no money to pay the impending fine, he should be forced to go to prison.

This last assertion struck black dismay into the heart of the poor little scapegoat, and she immediately cast about for some way of escape for her father, whom she loved with a devotion that was the more pathetic, because of the unworthiness of the object.

Just at the crucial moment, Miss Fillingham returned home, her face saddened and her heart softened by a recent bereavement. And to her Mamie turned, as to a helper tried and proved.

"If you'd be pleased to loan me the five shillings ma'am, I'd be most certain to work it out in time," she pleaded, lifting her wistful gaze to the sorrow-lined face of her benefactress; "I can scrub doorsteps and clean windows some, and I'd keep your gravel weeded most beautiful."

"But you will have to go to school now you know, Mamie, for it would never do to let this sort of thing occur again," and Miss Fillingham drew her face into stern lines of righteous

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indignation at the bare idea of such a scandal among her very respectable tenants.

"Yes, ma'am, of course," put in Mamie eagerly; "but there's mornings, and noonspells, and Saturdays, I'd work it out most faithful, I do assure you," and again the eyes pleaded the cause of their owner more effectively even than her speech.

Miss Fillingham paused, hesitated and was lost. Out came her purse, and in a moment more two shining half-crowns lay in Mamie's small palm, whilst the relief in her eyes was quite wonderful to behold.

"There you are child, and for ten weeks to come I shall expect you to keep my door-step clean, and the front gravel free from weeds," the lady said in a hard tone, though the same hardness was all of it for herself and none for the child, for already a doubt of her own wisdom had crept into her heart and was rendering her very uncomfortable.

She might have to bewail her own unwise generosity still more by and by, but just now she managed to stifle forebodings on that score, by looking at the happiness that danced in Mamie's wistful eyes.

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CHAPTER III.

FOR GOOD FELLOWSHIP.

WHEN the day came for Ikey Dodds to appear before their worships on the bench, he went fortified with Miss Fillingham's two half-crowns in his pocket, and quite a warm admiration of his little neglected daughter in his heart.

A gentleman anxious to pose as a philanthropist occupied the chair on this occasion, and when Ikey Dodds told the story of his widowerhood, and the neglected condition of his home, this individual's heart speedily softened towards the breaker of the law, who had been summoned before him.

"If we let you off with a small fine will you promise that it shall not occur again?" asked the philanthropist in a tone meant to be judicially stern and severe, but which in reality was manifestly eager and benevolent.

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"That I will, your worship," responded Ikey Dodds with so much fervour, that the philanthropist turned a beaming face round towards his brethren on the bench, with a nod of the head that might easily be translated into meaning that he was wiser than they.

And they had both of them made it plain as to their own opinion of the merits of the case. But then the philanthropist argued to himself, what was their judgment worth, compared with his own? One of them was a manufacturer whose time was solely taken up in getting rich, the other was a scholar who lived in his books: what could such men know of their fellows, or how could they rightly interpret the motives or emotions that ruled the cases with which they had to deal? So he waved their opinions aside by the sheer force of his own eloquence, nor found the task especially difficult either, for the scholar was a dreamer also, and had no mind for being drawn into wordy, and fruitless argument, whilst the manufacturer was new to his position, and for a time oppressed by his want of experience.

"Then we will fine you half-a-crown," the philanthropist said, the benevolent roll of his voice quite marked now, whilst he beamed and

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swelled with satisfaction at his own generosity, and the power of his eloquence upon his brother magistrates.

Ikey Dodds paid the fine with one of Miss Fillingham's half-crowns, then walked out of court with the fellow coin burning a hole in his pockets: whilst the desire to spend grew upon him, until it reached the force of an overwhelming passion.

Nor was the opportunity lacking, hardly had he reached the outer air, than a heavy hand was clapped on his shoulder, and a jovial voice shouted cheerily:

"So yer managed ter pay up, arter all, Ikey, my boy! That's right, never say die, yer'll mebbe live ter see a good old age, even yet," and then the jovial voice broke into shouts of laughter at its own wit, in which the bystanders joined.

Ikey Dodds laughed too, but there was a consciousness of shame underlying his mirth, and he was wishing heartily enough that the money paid for the fine had been his own honest earnings, and not begged from his landlady. And then he was glad to divert attention from himself, by questioning the man who had first accosted him.

"How comes it you're here to-day, Bobby

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Scott, why it's more than a month o' Sundays since you set foot in Woolacott I reckon ?"

Bobby Scott laughed again, his loud-voiced mirth penetrating to the room where the magistrates were still sitting, and causing them to utter not a few strictures on the want of order outside the court.

"No, I don't suppose I have; the air o' the place don't what yer call suit me; but we've got some doings on at Frampton, and I promised the landlord o' "The Angel," as I'd come in and ask the brewers ter send him over some more ginger beer and stuff, as he's pretty well cleared out."

"Doings? What sort?" demanded Ikey, his well-known thirst for dissipation, or as he of Frampton styled it—doings, being quickly awakened by Bobby's explanation of his presence in the town.

"Farmer Pullen has got a rabbit shoot up fer ter-day, and a supper ter foller at 'The Angel'; I don't mind telling you as an old friend, as there's a little more fer supper than yer might bargain for, a sixpenny raffle for a fine fat goose. And drink—why there's enough ter drown yerself in a'most."

"What's to pay?" demanded Ikey, fingering the half-crown in his pocket, and telling

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himself how pleased Mamie would be if he chanced to win the raffle and carried home the goose.

Bobby Scott shot him a sharp glance from half-closed eyes, then winked seductively, "Nothing ter you I guess, him at 'The Angel' is pretty well run off his legs ter-day, wife bad a-bed, supper ter cook and not a soul 'cept me ter do a hand's turn as yer may say. Will yer come?"

Would he not! Poor little Mamie crouching by the unswept hearth of No. 37, Rocker's Crescent in an agony of dread, lest the five shillings should not be enough, and her father be sent to prison, in spite of her efforts on his behalf, gathered fresh fear and apprehension with each hour that passed, until at length unable to longer endure the strain of suspense, she crept to the door and stood looking timidly forth.

One or two neighbours passed, but they wore averted faces, and these she did not venture to accost. Then Jonathan West came by, with a word of greeting and pleasant smile for the child that had told him who was to blame for the lameness of his horse; and to him she ventured to put her timid query.

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"Please, Mr. West, have the magistrates sent father to prison?" she asked, the tears that had been gathering during those hours of waiting beginning to drop with slow persistency down her thin white cheeks.

"Ain't he come home yet?" queried Mr. West in surprise.

"No, no, and it's going on for four by our clock," said the poor child clasping her hands in keen distress.

"I heard Sam Rawlings say as Ikey Dodds had only been fined two shillings and sixpence; let off light, Sam said he was, and he ought to know, for he was there himself, about that business of his cows straying," Jonathan West retorted, after a moment spent in wondering privately where Ikey Dodds could have procured the money from wherewith to pay the fine, as he happened to know in what especially low water the man was at this particular time.

But a great relief took possession of Mamie; that her father was not in the prison to which her childish terrors had sent him, was comfort enough for the present, and the colour came back to her cheeks, and the light to her eyes, as she said: "Oh, it is all right then, thank you, Mr. West, for I know father had enough in his pocket to pay that."

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Jonathan West nodded slowly and moved on. Never a man of many words, he maybe thought the more, though if he did the world was none the wiser, since he never gave it the benefit of his thinking.

Mamie ran back to the house, and imparting to Mrs. Clayton the joyful news that her father was still a free man, flew about as lightly as any bird to get the room tidy and bright for her father's return.

Her efforts at cleanliness were not so ineffectual now, thanks to many a helpful hint and suggestion from Miss Fillingham, whose interest in Mamie had certainly grown warmer in accordance with the growing aloofness of the other neighbours.

Mrs. Clayton received Mamie's tidings with an inarticulate grunt, and relapsed into meditation straightaway.

Mamie meditated too, but she worked also, and with such goodwill and energy of purpose that in a very short time the bare, meanly furnished room was looking quite bright and cheery. She sighed a little as she set the supper out, because she had nothing better than bread and cheese, with a tiny scrap of butter, for her father when he should come; then her face brightened as she thought of the

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other half-crown, and she wondered if he would spend a portion of it in something nice for supper. Doubtless, the biggest half of it would go to the public-house, she was prepared for that, but he would surely bring some of it home.

The hours ticked themselves away on the American clock hanging against the wall, but no father appeared. Mrs. Clayton grumbled a little, drank a cup of tea and went to sleep, then awoke again to drink more tea, do yet more grumbling, and then sleep. But Mamie crouched on the floor by the fire, huddled into a heap with nose and knees almost touching, stared silently into the red heart of the fire, and strained her ears to listen for her father's coming.

Eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock, came and passed, and then the child cramped and chilly rose to her feet, with a sigh of mingled weariness and impatience.

Mrs. Clayton was snoring heavily now with her head against the chimney jamb, whilst the fire had died to a handful of dull red embers.

Half-past ten. It was no question of her father bringing anything home for supper now, and realising with some bitterness of heart that there would probably be no change from the

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half-crown either, Mamie went to the table, and cutting herself a thick slice of bread, began to eat it eagerly, for by this time she was very hungry indeed.

Eleven o'clock struck. The public-houses would be closing now, and her father would doubtless come reeling in, knock the table over, upset the chairs, and perhaps have to lie himself on the floor all night from sheer inability to walk upstairs to his bed.

With a caution born of experience she cleared the table of everything breakable, put out the lamp, which like the fire was failing for want of tending, and lighting a candle in a tin candlestick, set it on the high chest of drawers where it was safely out of harm's way. Then she began to wonder, with a clutch of fear at her heart, why her father had not appeared. She had heard the shouts of other travellers, in the distance, as they passed along the end of Rocker's Crescent where it abutted on the High Street, but these died away, and then silence profound, and unbroken, settled down on the outside world, whilst within the room the clock and Mrs. Clayton kept up such a monotonous duet of ticking and snoring, as drove the one poor little watcher almost to distraction.

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One moment she wondered if Jonathan West had made a mistake when he told her that her father had been fined; perhaps they had sent him to prison without the option of a fine; she had heard Mrs. Clayton say that such things were done sometimes. Then again her fears wandered off in another direction, and she feared that coming home drunk from some one of the houses of entertainment that he frequented, he might have fallen, and even now be lying helpless and incapable on the cold hard ground with the raindrops beating upon his unprotected form.

A wail of utter misery broke from her at this, which awoke Mrs. Clayton, who grumbled a great deal because it was so late, and cold, then, muttering, went off to bed, whither she was followed by Mamie, who was afraid to linger alone in the awful silence downstairs.

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CHAPTER IV.

AN UNLUCKY RIDE.

THE supper at "The Angel" was what the landlord described as a howling success. And certainly the description was very applicable, for the people who supped shouted a great deal, howled fragments of songs in hoarse voices, and burst ever and anon into peals of discordant laughter, as some fresh joke was cracked, or a feeble flash of wit evoked their drunken merriment.

Ikey Dodds laughed louder than them all, and deemed he had good cause for mirth, since he had won the goose. Yes, strangely enough, he had won it. The half-crown burning his pocket so greatly, he had taken two tickets for the raffle instead of one, and then drew the lucky number at his first turn after all.

There were some of the company who murmured loudly that the goose was not

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worth more than half the money expended on the raffle; but then, as Ikey argued in his maudlin understanding, there are grumblers to be found in every transaction of the sort, and at least the goose was cheap to him, since he had got it for a shilling, might even have had it for sixpence if only he had known that his first draw was to be the lucky one.

And to commemorate his triumph in what he deemed a fitting manner, he promptly expended the remaining one shilling and sixpence, in treating the company so far as the money would go, who in their turn treated Ikey, until by the time they were ready to start for home, there were few among the guests of "The Angel" who were able to walk without assistance, and none at all who were not decidedly muddled by the depth and strength of their potations.

Among the revellers were two men from Ripley, a village lying about midway between Frampton and Woolacott, but a little off the main road. These men in tipsy generosity and good-fellowship, volunteered to give Ikey Dodds a lift on the way home, as any prospect of his walking all the way to Woolacott in his present condition was obviously out of the question.

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As he did not seem able to sit up with any degree of safety to himself, they stowed him in at the back of the cart like a sack of potatoes, a dead pig, or any other unconscious and irresponsible object, tying the tail-board with a bit of string to keep it fast.

But either they had bungled with their knots, or the string had proved inadequate to the strain put upon it, for when the man drew rein at the place where the road to Ripley turned off the way to Woolacott, they found, to their dismay, that the tail-board was hanging down, and their passenger had disappeared.

"Did yer see Ikey get down, Bill?" demanded the driver of the cart, turning on his companion with sulky ferocity.

"Bless yer, no, I've bin ter sleep, and dreamin' as I were a kid again as went ter Sunday School, and said my prayers o' nights," yawned Bill, opening his jaws to their very widest capacity, and stretching himself in a sleepy fashion.

But the other man looked uncomfortable, even leaving the horse, and walking back a little way along the track they had come, as if to see whether Ikey might not be lying in the road.

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There was nothing to be seen, however, and when he rejoined Bill, who was dozing again, he was inclined to be very angry indeed at the disappearance of Ikey, blaming every cause saving his own carelessness, and finally becoming so quarrelsome that he threatened to pitch Bill out of the cart for venturing to disagree with him.

Calming down a little after a time, he clambered into the cart again, and drove on towards his home at Ripley, saying that since Ikey had chosen to get down without letting him know, he did not intend troubling himself any further about the matter, which decision Bill sleepily coincided with, then began to dream of his boyhood again, as the cart bumped and jolted over the rough road towards Ripley.

Meanwhile, about three-quarters of a mile further back along the way they had come, Ikey Dodds was lying on his back in the middle of the road, as senseless, and as helpless as any block of wood might have been.

Time passed on, the rain began to fall, whilst the wind moaned sadly through the empty tree-tops. The moon came out for a little while, but finding the night so

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dreary, retired behind a mass of clouds in disgust.

Then there came a sound of horse's hoofs along the silent road, followed by the noise of cart wheels, and the moon emerged from her obscurity in a great hurry, as if fearful lest the advancing vehicle might not be driven over that unconscious figure in the roadway unless some light were thrown upon the situation from above.

There was the sound of a hasty exclamation, the horse was pulled up with a jerk, and some one jumped down from the trap, and came to stoop over the drunken man.

That some one chanced to be the parish doctor, who was returning to Woolacott from a visit to a dangerous case in an outlying hamlet, and he pulled and twisted poor Ikey about with true professional ease and skill, making a running commentary the while upon this new and unexpected patient.

"Humph! Drunk of course, dead drunk; had a nasty fall out of a cart I suppose, for certain I am he could not have walked far in this condition, and it is a clear mile from any house at all. Head cut, and bleeding, I wonder his skull wasn't cracked, or his neck broken; but there, it is marvellous how soft

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"The horse was pulled up with a jerk."—*Page 40.*

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a drunken man seems to fall. And now, what am I going to do with him?"

This question threatened to be a poser, and took some time to argue out, the doctor walking backwards and forwards between the trap and the helpless man, talking to himself at a great rate, as he had a way of doing when in any degree perplexed or excited.

Presently having got his horse and trap into position, he stooped over Ikey, and by dint of putting out all his strength, and using his scientific knowledge as well, he contrived to get the drunken man on to his back, and so tilted him gently into the trap, the horse—a quiet one—behaving in a most praiseworthy manner.

An inarticulate grunt or groan was the only notice Ikey took of this change of quarters, and then he lay helpless as before, only breathing in heavy, laboured gasps.

"Poor fellow, poor fellow, I'm afraid you're pretty bad," the doctor murmured in a compassionate tone, as he started his horse on again as quickly as it could go. There was no anger or disgust in his tone or in his manner, for however much Ikey Dodds might have been to blame in bringing himself into his present plight, he was just now in a critical

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condition, where, indeed, a little neglect might have proved fatal, and a doctor knows that his business is not to criticise the past of his patients, but to act promptly in the present.

Woolacott Workhouse was the nearest place to which, at such a late hour, the doctor could turn for assistance, and thither he drove with as much haste as he could, clanging loudly at the gate bell, and startling the infirm old porter almost into a fit, by the noise he made.

The master ventured an objection, suggesting that the police-station was the proper place for men who had no more sense than to drink themselves into such a condition. But the doctor thrust him aside impatiently.

"The poor wretch is dying, listen to his breathing; he will slip through our fingers whilst we stand cavilling if we don't take care; here, porter, lend a hand, will you?" he called out to the house-porter, who with the gate-porter, and the master, had collected in a little group round the cart.

If hatred is infectious, so in an equal degree is mercy, that peremptory word of the doctor's concerning the critical condition of the offender stirred the men to a willing

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zeal of helpfulness on his behalf. Quickly, and deftly, they bore him to a bed, then set to work to carry out the doctor's orders, doing their duty every whit as cheerfully as if the patient had been the most virtuous individual upon the face of the earth.

It was noon the next day before Ikey had sufficiently recovered to furnish a clue to his own identity; and then he had the grace to be feebly ashamed of himself, and volubly thanked every one who came near him for all their consideration and kindness to his unworthy self.

But when, just as it was growing dusk, Mamie came stealing into the big bare room looking like a pale little ghost, with her ragged frock, and frightened face, the latent fatherhood in him stirred feebly and awoke, and he burst into loud excited sobbing, declaring noisily that he was the very worst father in Woolacott, but he would turn over a new leaf in the future, and be different, or know the reason why.

Only one word of reproach did Mamie speak, and that was when she murmured sadly, "I wish they'd fined you the whole five shillings, father, don't you?"

"But I've got a goose, Mamie, a whole

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goose, I won it in a raffle, and brought it home for you," he whispered eagerly.

She only shook her head with an incredulous air, she had heard nothing of the goose, and the doctor who had come to tell her where her father was knew nothing of it either, so she rejected the idea as being merely a fancy of the poor befuddled brain.

Even Ikey himself could not make the story properly coherent, being by this time uncertain as to whether he might not have sold the goose afterwards, and spent the money in drink.

The same uncertainty prevailed in the mind of the man to whom Ikey Dodds owed that unlucky ride home from Frampton, and who, finding the goose in his own cart next morning, took it indoors to his wife, and she settled the question once and for always, by cooking the bird for dinner that day.

A week later Ikey Dodds was able to leave the workhouse infirmary, and he left declaring that he had never been so comfortable in all his life before, and that he should be happy to recommend the institution to all his friends.

But Mamie's face had a hungry, unsatisfied look. And the grim, gaunt wolf of starvation prowled closer about the door of No. 37.

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CHAPTER V.

TRUTH-TELLING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

THAT winter was a hard one for Mamie in many ways, for one thing she had to go to school, and, underfed, and over-worked as she was, compete with children well-nourished, and well-cared for.

As a matter of course, she could not do as they did, and was accordingly looked upon as a dunce by her class-mates, whilst the teachers chided her for what they deemed inattention, and lack of painstaking.

Ikey Dodds had received notice to leave Rocker's Crescent, even Miss Fillingham had no word of excuse for him since the affair of the goose-raffle at "The Angel." And when he left No. 37, took a miserable little house in Mellin Street, a miserable, tumble-down place,

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the only attraction it possessed being the lowness of its rent.

The children of Mellin Street were more friendly than those of Rocker's Crescent had been, but Mamie shrank from them with their boisterous ways, their fearful language, and their general depravity.

The children of Rocker's Crescent had nick-named her Tell-tale-tit, and the children of Mellin Street were quick to catch it up, and adopt it for their own use. Did they get into any trouble of detection concerning the lawless pranks in which they were pleased to indulge, then it was Mamie who was blamed for the telling, though often she did not know there was mischief on hand even.

Mrs. Clayton still formed one of the household, and meditated more than ever. Ikey Dodds had forsaken his regular work at the Bexley mill, and had taken to avocations of a much more questionable character, which bringing at times an apparent abundance to the home, at others left the small family on the brink of starvation.

It was during one of these straitened spells that Ikey fell sick, and then when actual starvation stared them in the face, Mrs. Clayton roused from her ruminations and

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applied for parish relief for Mamie and her father.

The relieving officer, a man with a hard face and a kindly heart, came in response to the application, and he looked up at the ceiling and down to the floor, staring at Mrs. Clayton's dreamy face until it seemed almost as if his sharp eyes would make gimlet holes in her countenance. Perhaps he saw further than she deemed it possible for any one's gaze to penetrate, and so had a glimpse of the rabbit skins hanging behind the pantry door, for his face grew even harder in its expression as he told her that she must attend at the workhouse for the next sitting of the board of guardians.

"But I couldn't walk up that hill, I'm such an invalid you know," whined the woman, though from her appearance no one would have thought it, so plump and well-nourished did she look.

"You must either come, or send the child," retorted the relieving officer, as he turned to walk out of the house.

"Mamie, you'll have to go, my poor legs would never get me up that hill," Mrs. Clayton said, when Mamie came in from school that afternoon.

"But there'll be such a lot of gentlemen,

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and I shall be afraid," stammered Mamie, a pink flush of trouble staining for a moment her thin little face that had grown so pale of late.

"A selfish child you must be, to make a fuss like that, and your poor father lying above on his bed, as you may say starving," retorted Mrs. Clayton with a vindictive scowl at Mamie, and then she turned her back on the offender, and betook herself to meditation once more.

Mamie's heart beat fast as she too turned away, and stumbled up the dark stairs to the stuffy little bedroom above, where her father was lying.

But she did not say anything to him of her trouble, experience having taught her that it was wiser to lock her small worries in her own breast. When however she passed out of his room, into the still smaller one occupied by herself and Mrs. Clayton, she knelt for one minute by the bed, and poured it all into the ear of the One who never sleeps, and who ever gives heed when His children cry.

Mamie's mother had taught her to pray, not merely to do as many children do, that is, kneel down by the bedside night and morning, just to gabble over a form of words, but to

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bring her troubles great and small to the feet of the Father in heaven, and then to believe with implicit faith that He would heed and answer the petition. When Mrs. Dodds had taught her daughter this first and fundamental privilege of a child of God, she died, leaving this implanted truth as a precious legacy to the forlorn little girl, who had so little else of good in her lot.

Mamie's dreams that night were all of awful personages in big top hats, which as she gazed at them grew taller and taller until at last they developed into the big chimney of Bexley mill; after that the personages turned into policemen, who all came tramping into the house, to search for the rabbit skins hanging behind the pantry door.

At this, Mamie uttered such a cry of distress in her sleep, that it awoke her, awaking Mrs. Clayton also, who demanded in an angry tone why she made so much noise when tired folks desired to sleep, then, not waiting for an answer, turned round to snore again.

But Mamie laid awake in a condition of palpitating terror. No one but herself knew why she so much feared to appear before the board of guardians on her father's behalf. There would be questions asked, she knew,

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as to how he had earned his living at Bexley mill; and she might have to tell of sundry and divers night excursions, that had brought much profit, and abundance of food to follow. Then there were bursts of wild dissipation to account for, and the gentlemen might want to know where the money had come from to buy the liquor, upon which her father had so many times drank himself to intoxication.

Dared she tell a lie, and say she did not know? Wearily she tossed and turned upon her hard bed, as she threshed out the problem of right and wrong in her small mind.

They would not doubt her, of that she felt assured. But what of herself? And what would her mother have said?

Presently in the midst of her troubled musings, there came to her a fragment of Scripture that she had heard, and that had lingered in her mind unheeded and forgot, until now—"In all this Job sinned not."

It was only a fragment, and she had not the slightest idea at what part of the Bible it was to be found, although probably as Job was mentioned, it might form a part of the book of that name. But slight as it was, it was nevertheless sufficient to turn the balance for her between right and wrong, since it showed

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her plainly that however great or overpowering the trouble might be, God never meant that His children should make a way of escape for themselves by falling into sin of any sort or kind whatsoever.

The certainty of this brought a wonderful peace to her perplexed understanding, and presently she fell asleep again nor awoke until morning.

Her father was better, and talked largely of what he should be able to do, when he could get on his feet again. He was in a good temper too, and promised Mamie that if the application for out-relief was successful, she should have a new frock by Sunday.

"But we shall want the money to buy food," she faltered, his radiant self-satisfaction bringing to her a dreadful sinking of heart.

"That's a good one! Wait till you get downstairs, and then you'll see," he retorted with a laugh, that presently set him off coughing, and ended by nearly choking him.

Mamie went downstairs with slow steps and a troubled face. She had gone to bed early on the previous night, and supperless too, saving for a fragment of dry bread. Yet the hint of plenty dropped by her father brought no

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happiness to her, because of the certainty of her knowledge that the supplies had not been honestly come by.

But her hungry little mouth watered in good earnest, when she pushed open the stairs door, and was met by the appetising odour of fried bacon, whilst the first thing she saw, was Mrs. Clayton turning great slices of frizzling fat in the pan she had lifted from the fire.

There was bread too, and butter, with a pile of grocery on the table, and Mrs. Clayton was bustling about in quite a wide-awake manner.

"What a time you've been," said the woman in a sharp tone; "here, sit down and get your breakfast, I'll carry your father's up to him," and she pushed a plate with a big slice of bacon on it towards Mamie, at the same time cutting her a portion from the loaf.

"Is all that for me?" queried the child looking at the tempting plate, and feeling actually sick with hunger.

"Yes, and you'd better be getting it quick, for I want this cleared away, smell and all, before any of the neighbours come in, so you'll just please make haste and not waste time in staring like a born idiot at food that's meant to be eaten and not looked at," and having

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delivered herself of this exhortation, Mrs. Clayton went away upstairs to the sick man, and Mamie was left alone.

A moment she hesitated, poor child, whilst a feeling of strong repulsion swept over her, and then nature, starved nature, asserted itself, and with an inarticulate cry such as a famished animal might give, she fell upon the food, and eat it ravenously, not staying for the slower process of cutting the meat with knife and fork but tearing it into bits with her quick impatient fingers.

And how good it was! One needs to be half-starved, to drag out a miserable existence on an allowance of food only sufficient to keep the life in one's body, before one can realize what that morning's plenty meant to Mamie Dodds.

The plate was emptied before Mrs. Clayton came downstairs again, and then Mamie cleared away the pile of groceries and assisted in washing the breakfast dishes, before friendly or curious neighbours might be likely to be paying unexpected visits, and sniffing out for themselves the unexpected plenty.

Nearer and nearer approached the dreaded time when she must present herself at the workhouse. And the remembrance of her

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beautiful breakfast did but make Mamie's heart beat faster at the prospect.

It would be telling the truth under difficulties now. Yet it must be done, cost what it might, for since Job had not sinned, it was of course not right that she should sin either.

But she did wonder over and over again as she set out on her walk to the workhouse, whether Job's provocation had been anything like as great as her own.

She knew in a vague sort of way that he had found life by no means easy, for she had heard Mrs. Clayton say one would need the patience of Job to endure this, that, and the other. But her knowledge of the patriarch's history was of the haziest possible description, as indeed was her knowledge of the Scriptures as a whole.

Vainly just then did she wish that she knew more; and she wrinkled her forehead in frowns of perplexity concerning the mysteries of right and wrong, as she ascended the hill which led to the Woolacott Workhouse.

But all the frowning in the world could not make the matter clearer, and it was a very ignorant, very puzzled little maiden who presented herself at length before the dread portal to ask for admission.

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CHAPTER VI.

AWKWARD QUESTIONS.

ONCE inside the big, bare entrance hall, Mamie felt less frightened and forlorn, for several other people, both men and women, were sitting there bent on a similar errand to her own. And the sight of these was distinctly comforting.

It was warm too, a big stove in the middle of the floor sending out a glowing heat, which made the cold of the outside all the sharper by contrast.

Sitting there, lulled by the warmth, and strengthened by the unusual liberality of her breakfast fare, Mamie was almost ready for sleep and dreams, when a strident voice, somewhere on the floor above, shouted, "Isaac Dodds," and another voice nearer

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still took up the cry, "Isaac Dodds," whilst the porter standing at the bottom of the stairs, and not four paces from Mamie, bellowed forth in a tremendous bass that almost seemed to shake the floor, "Isaac Dodds."

Up jumped Mamie, her teeth fairly chattering with fright, for she was under the mistaken impression that the personages upstairs were shouting revilements upon her father.

"Oh, it's you, is it, little girl? Very well, you walk up those stairs, and you'll see a gentleman at the top as will show you in, and mind you don't forget to make a reverence to the chairman, to show you've decent manners," adjured the deep-voiced porter, taking her by her thin little shoulders, and pushing her gently towards the stairs, up which she stumbled in such blind agitation, as to make it quite wonderful she ever got safely to the top.

There was a kind-looking individual standing there, whom, in her confusion, she supposed must be the chairman, of whom the porter had spoken, and remembering in good time to be polite, performed a spreading curtsey before him.

But he took no notice, only caught her by

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the shoulders as the porter had done, and pushed her gently forward into a long, lofty room, which, to her timid gaze, appeared to be crowded with personages of very grand and awful aspect, who turned and looked at her until she felt as if she would sink into the floor at their feet.

"Come up here, little girl," said a voice, and lifting her eyes, Mamie saw standing at the far end of the room, the relieving-officer who had visited her father, and interviewed Mrs. Clayton.

She went forward at his bidding, until, having reached the place indicated, she found a small, quiet gentleman with a very pale face, and very black hair, sitting right before her, and surveying her with a fixed, intent gaze.

Divining, and rightly this time, that this must be the chairman, she performed another curtsey for his benefit, which brought an involuntary smile to his face, that being quickly checked, left it grave again, and stern as before.

"You have come for Isaac Dodds?" demanded this gentleman in a clear, decisive voice; everything about him was clear and decisive to match, saving his eyes, which were

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soft and luminous, with a certain sadness of expression that was rather felt than seen.

"Yes, please, sir," replied Mamie, with a curtsey which was an abbreviated edition of the first.

"Is he your father?"

"Yes, please, sir;" no curtsey this time, she deeming further observance of that kind unnecessary, now that the introduction was over and business well begun.

"What does your father do for a living?"

"Please, sir, he's ill, and stays in bed all the time."

"Yes, now, but what did he do when he was well, before he took to his bed, I mean?"

"He used to work at Bexley mill a long time ago," retorted Mamie in a dubious tone, feeling that the questioning was coming to uncomfortably close quarters now.

"Yes, that I know, but that, as you say, is some time ago, what has he done since?" asked the gentleman, his tone gathering impatience at what he deemed Mamie's disposition to fence.

There was an agonizing pause, wherein the child's heart beat thick and fast as she strove, yet strove in vain, to gather courage for the dreadful ordeal.

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"Will you not answer the gentleman?" said the relieving-officer, who towered above her like a grim sort of guardian angel.

Mamie shivered and turned whiter yet, after which she flushed a distressful crimson, and finally stammered forth, "He hasn't done much at all, sir, that I have known about."

"Then how have you lived?" asked the chairman, his brows creasing into a frown.

"We haven't had much sometimes, not enough to keep us from being hungry. And then things have been sent."

"What things?" demanded a fiery-faced personage sitting close by, and at whose unexpected query Mamie started in fright and surprise.

"Meat, sir, and groceries, and such things," she replied in a low tone of such evident unwillingness and pain, that the fiery-faced personage turned sharply upon her, as if about to drag the truth from her, that she fain would not tell.

But the chairman interposed a quiet question, himself giving the fiery-face a nod of repression, for which Mamie would have thanked him in her heart had she seen it. "Who sent these things which you speak of, meat, groceries, and so forth?"

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"Different people, sir, him from 'The Angel' at Frampton mostly, but there's others in Woolacott have brought things too," panted the child, for the dreaded places were very near now, and what might happen to her if she told the truth, and the whole truth, she could not even guess.

"Who were they—these people from Woolacott who brought your father things?" asked the quiet voice remorselessly.

"Jim Saxby and Bobby Lowndes," whispered Mamie, clasping her thin hands together in mute anguish; these two men had been arrested for stealing only a week or two previously, and were even now lying in the county gaol awaiting their trial.

"Ah!" the exclamation burst from the fiery-faced one, but again the chairman nodded repressively.

"What did you have for breakfast this morning, little one?" asked a benevolent-looking gentleman with a kindly voice, one of his hands creeping suggestively nearer to his capacious pocket, whilst he beamed on Mamie as though about to give her something substantial.

But a murmur of surprise ran round the room at her answer, which though given in

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a low tone was perfectly audible, "I had hot fried bacon, please, sir."

The hair of the benevolent gentleman almost stood up straight on his head at this astounding statement, and his hand came away from his pocket with a brisk movement of disgust.

Then the chairman spoke in his clear, decisive manner, "People who can afford to have hot fried bacon for breakfast should not apply for out-door relief."

A sob struggled in Mamie's throat as she stood, a convicted culprit before the board, her only crime, poor child, being that she had told the truth. But the relieving-officer bent forward and touched her on the shoulder, saying in a low tone:

"Tell the gentlemen what you had for dinner yesterday, and the day before."

"I had bread, dry bread," she answered in a pleading tone, looking up into his face, and turning her back on the others.

But he gently turned her round again, saying in an encouraging tone: "Tell them what you have had to eat since Sunday, they will know that you are speaking the truth."

But Mamie had come to the end of her

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poor little stock of courage, and, covering her face with her hands, sobbed from sheer fright and despair.

"Let her go, poor little soul," said the fiery-faced gentleman, in an odd, choked tone that sounded as if he had been taken suddenly unwell.

"You may go," said the chairman in unusually peremptory tones, he hated to see people—especially children—cry, and always avoided anything pertaining to a scene.

They gently hustled her out of the room after that, but just as she was disappearing through the doorway she heard one of the personages say:

"So that is where Saxby and Lowndes hid the stuff they stole."

Then another voice interposed hastily: "Hush, that is not our business, and the child is half-starved, that is evident."

The door was shut upon this, and nothing more was distinguishable in the confusion of talk that suddenly arose in the room she had left.

The people downstairs looked at her curiously, but they did not attempt to comfort her, and sobbing still, she went forth from the door which the porter had

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opened for her, and so down the road towards home.

By the time she reached Mellin Street her tears had dried, and she was quiet again, save for a restless expression in her eyes, and the panting breath which bespoke the labouring heart below.

"Well, and how have you fared?" demanded Mrs. Clayton in a sharp tone. She was not meditating now, but looked very wide-awake indeed.

Mamie sat down on a chair just inside the door, because her limbs trembled too much for her to stand, and with breathless haste she recounted her examination by the guardians, the questions they had asked, and the answers she had given, keeping nothing back, nor even striving to soften down any of those very awkward admissions that she had made.

Mrs. Clayton's face was a study of conflicting emotions as she listened, angry at first with the child because of her uncompromising truthfulness, but forgetting anger by and by, in personal fear at the consequences which might be expected to follow upon the heels of these revelations.

True, she had refrained from actual stealing

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herself, but public opinion was apt to class the receiver with the thief, and mete out a similar judgment to both, so there was little hope that she would escape her share of punishment, if she remained to await its coming.

"Go to your father, child, he don't seem so well," said the woman hurriedly, and when Mamie had disappeared out of sight on her way upstairs, Mrs. Clayton reached down her rarely used bonnet from the peg behind the door, and wrapping a thick shawl round her, hastily filled a basket with the meat and groceries Mamie had beheld with so much surprise in the early morning.

Then she left the house, closing the door behind her, and muttering as she went: "They may starve now, for what I care, and besides, there is always the 'ouse."

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CHAPTER VII.

W. H.

IT was sometime before Mamie returned downstairs, and when she did, the first thing that struck her was the absence of Mrs. Clayton's bonnet from the peg behind the door.

That the woman herself was not there did not surprise her, for Mrs. Clayton did occasionally condescend to gossip with the next door neighbour, going to the back door for that purpose. But to Mamie's certain knowledge the bonnet had not been worn since the day they left Rocker's Crescent, and its disappearance was portentous.

Puzzled, and perplexed, she looked round, missing now the shawl, and the market basket, then flinging open the pantry door, cried out in keen distress, to find the place swept bare

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of eatables, the bundle of rabbit skins alone remaining as a mute witness to the transactions of the past.

Mamie's distress was not for herself, nor yet regret because Mrs. Clayton had gone. But her father had sent her down to get his dinner, and now there was nothing left for him to eat.

Slowly, and sadly she took her way upstairs again, expecting violent abuse such as he had flung at her only just before, because of her tale-telling truthfulness. But in this she was disappointed, to her great thankfulness, the abuse in this case being flung at the head of Mrs. Clayton, who had deserted them in the hour of need.

"What shall we do, father?" ventured Mamie, when the storm of her father's raging had stayed itself somewhat, and he lay quiet from sheer exhaustion, though his face was twitching still with convulsive wrath.

"There's only one thing for us now I guess," he retorted wearily, and with the air of one who throws up the sponge, "and that is W. H."

"What's that, father?" she asked, a shiver of apprehension creeping over her, for even to her unaccustomed eyes her father was evidently worse.

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He laughed in a hollow, mirthless fashion, and said gruffly, "You'll know soon enough I reckon," and then he turned over in the bed, and seemed to go to sleep.

Mamie crept away and left him after a time, and going downstairs stood by the window looking out in a dreary listless fashion, waiting for what was to happen next.

Nor had she long to wait either, for presently she saw coming towards the house the relieving-officer who had stood close beside her in the board-room.

With a beating heart she opened the door for him to enter.

"Will you please to walk in, sir?" she asked timidly, by no means sure but that he had come to chide her for her behaviour at the board-meeting.

"Where is Mrs. Clayton?" he asked, stepping over the threshold, and looking round the room.

"Please, sir, she's gone."

"Where?"

"Please, sir, I don't know," Mamie answered with another shiver, for there was more in the situation than her wisdom could fathom, and the mystery made her uncomfortable and ill at ease.

"Ah!" there was a tremendous amount of

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meaning in the relieving officer's tone, but as Mamie had no clue to it she was none the wiser.

"Please, sir, will the gentlemen give father anything?" she ventured timidly, seeing the other stood as if lost in thought.

"Yes, the guardians have given him W. H., and a very good thing it will be for you, my dear, if he takes it," replied the officer in a grave tone.

Mamie's eyes grew wide with wonder. "Is it something nice?" she asked.

"It means for you," said the man with a kindly smile momentarily softening the hardness of his face, "food in plenty, with decent clothes to wear, and a fire to warm you when the weather is cold."

Mamie's eyes grew round with delight and wonder. "And what does it mean for father?" she pleaded, unselfish even now, and hesitating to accept a good for herself, which should not be a good for him also.

The officer hesitated. He had no such great opinion of Ikey Dodds, regarding him as a disreputable loafer, a bad father, and a law-breaker, but it was not easy to say this, or even hint it, to the child who loved and trusted her parent despite his known depravity, so he said instead, "Your father may not like

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it as much as you will perhaps, but even for him it will be better than the life he now lives—he will not be able to drink, and lose his senses, and so will get strong and well again."

Mamie was looking at him now, with the slow light of understanding dawning in her eyes. "Does it mean that we are to go into the workhouse?" she asked, a very horror of conviction creeping into her heart.

"Yes, of course," he answered, a little sharply now, impatient at the repulsion she manifested, knowing as he did how much better the change would be for her.

Mamie dropped into the nearest chair and wrung her hands in pathetic despair. "Oh sir, I'm afraid he won't go. And if he won't he'll just lie there and starve, for Mrs. Clayton took all the food away, and there is nothing left for him to eat."

"Don't cry, I will go upstairs and tell him myself," replied the officer with returning good nature, and suiting the action to the word he groped his way up the dark little staircase, whilst Mamie sat still on a chair, and tried to realise this new trouble.

It was sometime before he returned, and when at length he came stumbling down the stairs again, his face was even graver than before.

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"I've been talking to your father, and he's willing to be moved at once, and I'm going now to bring a cab and take you both to the house myself," he said in a hurried tone, then went out at the door, leaving Mamie alone.

She was too much astonished at first to do more than stare at him, but when the quick closing of the door recalled her to herself, she hurried away upstairs to see for herself, what mood her father could be in, to have consented so readily.

But he was very disinclined to talk, and to all her questions returned only dreamy, and sometimes incoherent answers.

Mamie grew frightened thinking he must be very ill indeed, and sitting down beside him, waited anxiously for the return of the relieving-officer.

Presently there was a rumble of wheels outside, and a murmur of voices, then the relieving-officer came stumbling up the stairs again, and proceeded to wrap the sick man round with blankets and quilts, Ikey Dodds not protesting by so much as a grunt even, though he groaned as if in pain, when they lifted him from the bed and carried him downstairs; for the relieving-officer had called the cabman to his assistance, the invalid being

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too heavy, and too helpless for one man's burden.

"Come, my dear, we are ready now," said the relieving-officer coming back for Mamie, when Ikey Dodds had been settled in the cab.

She stood up with a bewildered air looking round the disordered room. "But I must tidy the house first," she said in a helpless fashion, as if not knowing where to begin.

"No you need not. I will see to that and keep the key and take care of it until your father is better, or——" the relieving officer did not finish his sentence, instead he hurried Mamie out of the house and into the waiting cab, where Ikey Dodds lay propped up with pillows on the front seat.

It was two nights after this, and Mamie, who was already getting used to the changed conditions of her life, was fast asleep in bed, in a big dormitory with ten other little girls, when there came a touch on her shoulder, and she awakened to find the assistant matron bending over her, with a pitying look on her kind bright face.

"Mamie Dodds, your father is not so well and he wants to see you; make haste and put on your clothes and come with me," she said, putting down the candle she carried and

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helping the frightened, shivering child to scramble hastily into her garments.

Then she took her by the hand leading her out of the room, and through a great many passages, upstairs, and downstairs, until Mamie grew hopelessly bewildered, by which time they had reached a long room with subdued lights, and where quite a number of people were lying in bed.

Right up this room to the far corner she was led, and there, lying on a bed with a screen drawn closely round it, was her father, but so altered even in this short time, that at first he seemed to her like some one else, and not her father at all.

"Mamie," he gasped in an odd choked voice, "little Mamie, I wanted to see you to say good-bye before I went."

"But you're not going anywhere, are you father?" she asked, thinking that he must be wandering in his mind, and that the assistant matron had awakened her, that she might come and soothe him.

The ward nurse was present, but just now doing something beside a bed lower down the room, which also had a screen drawn round it; and seeing that there seemed so much to do, midnight though it was, the assistant

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matron resolved to remain and share the labour, notwithstanding the fact that it was long past the hour when she should by rights have gone off duty.

Ikey Dodds rolled his head about on the pillow as if it had a pain in it that only movement could soothe, then after a time he said: "Yes, yes, I'll have to go whether or no, when the call comes, and I wouldn't mind so much if I was sure I shouldn't miss the road—the right road as leads to peace in the ending!"

Mamie was certain now that his mind must be wandering, as it had been several times before during his illness that winter, and kneeling close beside him she laid her cheek caressingly against his hand, saying in a low tone: "Dear father, just rest and go to sleep, it is the middle of the night, and you can shut your eyes till the morning."

Ikey Dodds groaned. But he did not shut his eyes, instead he fixed them upon his child with a yearning, hungry gaze.

"I've been a bad father to you, Mamie, and may God forgive me, I was a bad husband to her that went before. But the chaplain told me that I'd come right, even yet, if I'd only faith to grasp the promises before I went."

"Father, father, are you going to die?" she

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wailed, clinging tighter to the hand against which her cheek was pressed.

"Yes, yes, but don't take on so, child. I've not been such a shelter to you as'll make you miss me much," he gasped, his breathing seeming to grow each moment more laboured, and utterance more difficult to accomplish.

"But you are my father, and I love you!" she cried in a passionate outburst of weeping. Then the hand of the assistant matron fell lightly on her shoulder again, followed by a whisper in her ear.

"Don't cry now, Mamie, there will be time for that by and by, say something to help him if you can, because, poor man, he is afraid."

Mamie's sobs ceased instantly, and she racked her small brain for some word of consolation that might fit the case of a dying man.

But her thoughts were always slow to sort themselves; and her mind never seemed able to retain more than a fragment of anything she wished to remember. Slowly, slowly, her effort to recall, took her back to the time when her mother lay dying, and the district visitor came to read the Bible to her. There had been one verse—the lady had read it over and over again—"Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life." Would that do,

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Mamie wondered, at least she might try, and putting her mouth close to the ear that was already growing dull in death, she said softly:

"'Jesus saith——I am the way.'"

"Aye, what?" queried Ikey Dodds with a sudden start, "who said that? Oh, but I'm afraid I'll miss the road!" and the sweat of a mighty anguish gathered on his forehead.

"Say it again," whispered the assistant matron, coming round the screen, to wipe the damp brow of the sick man, and put a spoonful of cordial into his mouth.

"'Jesus saith——I am the way,'" said Mamie.

But Ikey Dodds heard her not, for he had started on his journey.

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW MISTRESS.

THE years fled rapidly on after that night in the sick ward, when Mamie Dodds had seen her father die. And now her fifteenth birthday had come, and it was time for her to make her start in life.

She was a well-grown, rosy-cheeked maiden now: clean, and trim, and tidy, with not a trace about her of the hunger and rags of her former days, though the old name clung to her still, and the workhouse children called her Tell-tale-tit, hiding from her with jealous care any small rebellion against established law and authority that they might be cherishing, because of her uncompromising truthfulness, which would be sure to betray them, did any one question her upon the subject.

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Despite this drawback of truthfulness, however, she was not unpopular among her associates in the workhouse, for she was good-tempered and helpful, and there was not one but would bid her good-bye with regret.

There were many misgivings in her own mind concerning the future, and drawing upon the experiences of her unhappy childhood, she had no such great opinion of life outside the walls of the Woolacott Workhouse.

But the young eagles might never learn to fly, if the old birds did not stir up the nest; and doubtless having this fact before their eyes, the guardians deemed it their duty to thrust Mamie forth to make her own way in the world.

So they considered suitable situations, interviewed ladies requiring servants, and finally accepted the offer of Mrs. Iles, of Maidenbury, who had volunteered to take Mamie Dodds, and train her for a housemaid.

After all this had been settled, Mamie's opinion concerning her fitness for the post was asked, and as she had no liking for the prospect, yet did not dare to say so, she remained quite silent, a state of things which the committee appointed to interview her put

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down to shyness, and accordingly clinched the bargain with Mrs. Iles off-hand.

A very large lady was Mamie's new mistress, her skirts had a habit of rustling loudly, whilst the jet trimmings and beaded bracelets, with which she plentifully adorned her ample person, added their share towards making her an imposing presence.

It was a soft, warm evening in September when Mamie arrived at Maidenbury station, she having made the ten-mile railway journey in company with the gardener's wife from the workhouse, who was going to see her mother.

There was no one to meet her at the station, so Mrs. Brown, the gardener's wife, put her into the 'bus with her bundle of clothes, and, bidding her be a good girl, sent her off to the beginnings of her new life.

"Here you are, miss, step out quick, for I'm in a hurry," called the 'bus conductor sharply, after a fairly long drive through a bewildering network of streets, for Maidenbury was a city of distinction, whilst Woolacott was merely a little manufacturing town; and it was only natural that Mamie should feel strange and confused.

"Which is the house, please, sir?" she

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asked in such genuine distress that the brusque conductor took pity on her at once.

"Whose house?" he asked in such a mild pacific manner, that one might have supposed he could change his nature with as much ease as he could remove his cap.

"The one where Mrs. Iles lives, please, sir?"

"That's it, the one with the yaller blinds," he murmured, pointing to a semi-detached residence of amazing smartness and elegance of appearance, then he touched his bell, the 'bus rolled on, and Mamie stood alone on the side walk, a very forlorn little maiden indeed.

There was no one at hand to tell her to go to the back-door, and as the front entrance was directly facing her as she entered the garden, she walked up the steps, and rang the bell.

A very smart damsel with a turn-up nose appeared in answer to the summons, and after surveying Mamie all over in great astonishment, asked in a tone of lofty superiority: "Are you the new girl from Woolacott Workhouse?"

"Yes, if you please," replied the new comer, wincing and blushing at the implied scorn.

"Well, you are a cool one, to come ringing at the front-door bell like that; perhaps you'd

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like to go into the drawing-room, and sit down in an easy-chair till missus comes home?"

"I don't mind," faltered Mamie, who in her dismay and confusion would have said the same, if the other had suggested she should sit in the coal-hole.

The smart damsel tilted her nose yet further in the air, laughing disdainfully.

"Well, you're the greatest soft I've seen to-day, or all this week, anyhow. Come along, I'll let you in this way seeing I've got the door open, but don't go trying it on again that's all."

Mamie followed meekly in, and tip-toed across the plentifully-bedizened hall, quite overawed by the magnificence of her new surroundings.

"Come on, this way," said her guide, disappearing with quite alarming suddenness down a dark little staircase to the kitchen.

"Oh, how hot it is!" exclaimed Mamie when she reached the ill-lighted, ill-ventilated apartment below, where a big fire was burning, and a clothes'-horse hung with wet garments added to the strange stuffiness of the whole.

"Ah, not what you've been used to I suppose, paupers had need to be particular, and workhouse girls most need of all," sneered

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the damsel with such cutting scorn, that Mamie crimsoned again under the sting of it.

"I told Mrs. Iles what it would be if she would persist in having a girl off the parish; but there, it was having you or nobody, for girls won't stop at a place like this," and the superior one laughed loudly, but in a jarring, unmirthful sort of fashion that made Mamie's heart go lower still.

"Why won't they stop?" she asked.

"Oh, you'll see, and before you've been here long either, no need to make you wise too soon. But you'd best get off your things, and begin to take hold of your work, for I'm off in another hour."

"But Mrs. Iles said——" began Mamie, in troubled agitation, and then the jarring, unmirthful laugh cut across, and broke into her unfinished sentence.

"When you are as old as I am, you'll know better maybe, than to believe all that folks say. But make haste do, for there's no end to be done."

And so indeed there was as Mamie found to her cost. But it was not that day or the next, or for some days after that, that the full knowledge of the hardness of her life

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came to her. The first few weeks it was only hard work that she had to complain of, and the exhaustion that comes from hurriedly bolted meals, and a too scanty allowance of sleep.

Mr. Iles was a meek little man, very much afraid of his wife, who dominated everybody with her loud scolding tongue. But he ventured to tell the lady one day that she had best be careful, and not let the workhouse girl get ill from overwork, or there might be unpleasantness with the authorities, such things had been heard of before, and they might occur again.

Then, indeed, Mrs. Iles's wrath and anger broke forth, and expended itself, not only upon the culprit, Mr. Iles, but upon the innocent victim for whom he had ventured to plead. And from that day forth Mamie's life was rendered a burden to her, an intolerable existence that went far towards breaking her spirit, and developing in her that depravity, that is by common consent supposed to lurk in the breasts of all such as owe their upbringing to their parish.

Scold, scold, scold. Morning, noon, and night the petty torment went on, whilst Mamie shed tears on to the dishes she

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washed, letting them slip sometimes and smash just from sheer terror of her loud-voiced, angry mistress, whose bad temper was like a chronic disease, that no amount of faithful service could alleviate or sweeten.

But One there was who walked by Mamie's side, and cheered her in this trying ordeal. Not to the outside world did He show His face, but it was not hidden from the lonely pauper waif, who had been thrust forth into the great battle of life with no friend saving this, to take her part, and aid her when the conflict waxed too dire for her powers to endure.

Then came a temptation, unexpected and keen, and it happened in this wise: there was company to supper one night, and Mamie was waiting upon the party, when one of the guests said something about somebody else who had left some money lying about in his house and lost it, or had it stolen.

"Serve him right," replied Mr. Iles with quite unusual energy, "he should not have been so careless as to leave it about."

"Don't you ever leave money about, Mr. Iles?" asked the guest with a laugh.

"It is a thing I am most particular not to do," replied the host. "I consider that the

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person who leaves money lying about as a means of temptation, deserves to have it stolen. And so I say that any one who finds money in my house is welcome to keep it, for me," retorted Mr. Iles who was still energetic in speech.

Mamie, hurrying to and fro with dishes, handing this one a jelly, and filling the glass of another, scarcely heeded his words at the time though she remembered them later. It was the look of baffled rage on the face of Mrs. Iles which attracted her attention chiefly, frightening her so much that she forgot to look where she was going, and hanging her foot in the dress of one of the guests, stumbled, dropping a valuable glass dish, which fell on the floor.

A storm of abuse from her mistress, contemptuous looks from the guests, with a scowl from the lady whose dress she had torn, and Mamie fled from the room too utterly abashed and scared to return, despite the impatient calls for her services.

For a day or two after that, Mamie had a good deal to endure, then came a pause, and for a whole day not an angry word, not a rebuke of any kind fell from the lips of Mrs. Iles, which was such a wonderful

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thing that Mamie began to wonder if she was ill.

The next morning when Mamie, half asleep, came down to light the fires, and begin the day's work, a great desire was upon her to shirk her duties, and render only eye-service, instead of the painstaking labour which was her wont.

But she flung the feeling off, and set briskly about sweeping the dining-room, even turning the carpet up at the edges, and being extra thorough in her task, as compensation to her own self-respect, for those thoughts of wrong that had come to her. Something rattled as her brush passed over it, and looking down she saw a shining half-crown lying there among the dust.

How had it come? A moment she paused in puzzled wonderment, it being quite improbable that the coin could have worked its way so far under the carpet of itself. Then a hot flush of indignation burnt its way into her face, as it dawned upon her, that Mrs. Iles must have put it there to see if she was to be trusted.

All her honest pride rose in instant revolt at this thought, and a torrent of passion swept into her heart, blind, unreasoning anger that

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burned chiefly to be revenged on the object that had evoked the outbursts.

Then came the remembrance of what Mr. Iles had said about any one who found money in his house being welcome to keep it. And at the recollection, her grasp tightened on that bright half-crown. It was hers then, since she had found it, and she might keep it for her own.

"Thou shalt not steal," said a voice in her heart, an echo of the chaplain's tones when he read the Commandments on Sundays in the church at the workhouse.

"It isn't stealing, Mr. Iles said"—began Mamie, but that inward voice was not to be put off like this, and broke in sturdily upon her attempt at explanation.

"To take a thing which is not your own is always stealing, there is no other name for it."

Mamie ground her teeth, and clenched her hand. "Oh, I'd like to keep it, to spite my mistress, she is so hard to me, always suspecting me of doing wrong when I am trying my hardest to please her. And now to put money under the carpet like this to try me! It is hateful, hateful."

"To do another wrong will not help the matter. And of what use to destroy your

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own character for ever, just for the sake of gratifying your dislike of the mistress who doubted you? Put that money down on the floor again, quick, Mamie Dodds, or the temptation may, even now, grow too strong for you to resist."

There was a clink of silver on the bare boards as the coin rolled away from Mamie's loosened fingers, and a gush of hot, repentant tears dropped from her eyes, as sweeping the dust into her hand, she hastily replaced the carpet over the coin, and went on with her work.

She did not carry the money to her mistress, resolving instead to leave it where she had found it; and never deeming, in her ignorance and inexperience, that a temptation once overcome, would ever rise to tempt her again.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE HAUNTING TEMPTATION.

BREAKFAST was late that morning, something was wrong with the kitchen fire, which would not burn at the first attempt, and had to be relighted. The toast was burnt and the egg-saucepan tilting over into the fire upset the eggs, breaking two of them.

It was Mamie's fault of course, she should have been more careful, and then these tribulations might not have ensued. But the same might be said of most of the small worries of life, though it is of little consolation to the sufferer to be reminded of this.

Mrs. Iles said a great many things upon the subject, which not being profitable hearing, are as well left out of this account of the occurrence; but Mamie's breakfast that morning was wet with her tears.

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She was becoming sullenly rebellious too. The desire to do her duty even under difficulties, was waxing feeble. A few weeks more of this kind of strain, and it might die all together. In which case it would be woe to Mamie Dodds, unless the Friend who stood beside her put out His strong hand to save her from falling.

Wrapped up in her rebellion, she was slower in doing her work that day, and was still upstairs making the beds, when a tradesman called to mend a pane of glass in the dining-room window, broken by Mr. Iles on the previous day. He was admitted by Mrs. Iles, and was busy at the window, when Mamie passed the room on her way down to the kitchen.

Twenty times that day was Mamie on the point of telling her mistress that she had found the money, and left it lying in the place where she had discovered it. Twenty times, perhaps more, yet every effort she made to get the disagreeable task over, so often did pride rise up and check her utterance.

In the afternoon Mr. Iles came rushing home from his office, with a telegram he had just received calling him to the bedside of a dying relative in Yorkshire.

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Instantly the household was thrown into a commotion, a certain train must be caught, if the gentleman was to reach his destination that day. And Mamie flew hither, and thither, intent only on being as helpful as she could, and so for a time forgot all about the money she had found hidden under the carpet.

Mr. Iles was off at last. And in time for his train too. But he had hardly left the house when visitors came in, who remained for tea, and Mamie was plunged straightaway into a fresh bustle of preparation and hard work, which still kept her mind diverted from the events of the morning.

But when she lay down to sleep that night in the quiet of her own room, the remembrance of the half-crown came back, bringing with it such a desire of possession, that it served to banish slumber. And tired though she was, Mamie tossed wakefully from side to side, held in the throes of a temptation too fierce to be borne.

"I will take it in the morning!" she whispered, as vanquished and overborne, the voice of conscience grew silent within her breast.

The thought, though it stilled the restlessness of her body, brought no peace to her heart,

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wrong-doing never does, nor wrong-thinking either. And later on when tardy sleep came to her, her repose was broken by dreams of the most hideous description. She was in prison for theft. She was chained to a stake in the river, and her fetters were formed of strings of stolen half-crowns. And worst of all, the pale ghost of her mother had come from the grave in Woolacott cemetery to grieve over her fall.

This last phase of fancy affected her so greatly that she awoke herself with weeping, and then was relieved to find that it was morning, and time for her to get up.

How tired she was, and jaded, from the hard labour of the previous day, and the mental turmoil of the night! But she dressed with feverish haste, notwithstanding, and not staying—not daring to pray, crept hurriedly down the stairs to commence her morning's work, and—and——, but not even to herself would she acknowledge yet, that she was intending to appropriate that half-crown.

The kitchen fire laid and lighted, she crept away to the floor above, to perform the same offices in the dining-room.

How stealthily she trod, yet how the stairs creaked, and the bronze ornament on the top

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of the clock gazed down at her with a severely reproachful gaze, as if it would fain add the weight of its silent testimony, to dissuade her from the contemplated wrong.

Cautiously she put her housemaid's box of brushes down by the fender, and then with the lamp in her hand, stole across the carpet, to the corner where the money was hidden.

Down on her knees she went, and thrusting her hand under the carpet, began to grope for the coin.

But Mamie's Friend, the Strong One who never failed, was standing by her still, though now she could not see Him, because her eyes were holden through sin, and she thought that she was alone. Further, and further she thrust her arm, groping to this side and that; until at last, with a sob that was almost relief, she realized that the half-crown had been taken away, and she herself caught back from flagrant sin.

Sitting there on the carpet, with the lamp on the floor by her side, she was crying tears of thankfulness over her escape from a temptation too strong for her, when suddenly a harsh voice smote on her ear, causing her to start in dreadful terror and dismay.

"What are you about, sitting in the corner

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when you should be doing that grate? Do you think I keep a servant for ornament pray!" demanded Mrs. Iles in her angriest tones.

"I—I was——" began Mamie in extenuation of her idleness, then stopped short, because of the moral guilt resting upon her.

"You were what?" asked the mistress in suspicious tones, coming a step nearer, and glaring down into the frightened face of the girl.

A dreadful despair was filling Mamie's heart, her Friend, the Strong One had left her, driven away by her sin, she supposed, since she could not see Him at her side; and in her desire to free her soul from the trammelling influences of the wrong-doing she had contemplated she resolved to throw herself on the mercy of her stern and angry mistress, in the hope that by so doing she might win the Strong One again to her side.

"I have been very, very wicked, please, ma'am," she faltered, lifting her wistful eyes to look into the face of Mrs. Iles, but dropping them again, lest the unbending anger she discovered there should frighten away her desire for confession.

"What have you done?" asked the hard

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tones of her tyrant, vibrating now with a certain triumph of detection.

"I found some money under the carpet yesterday morning, it was a half-crown, and I was angry, because I thought you had put it there to try me, and so I would not bring it back to you at once as I ought to have done, but I left it where it was, and, for a time, forgot all about it being there. Then last night when I went to bed, I was tempted to take it for my own; for I heard what Mr. Iles said the other night when the ladies and gentlemen were here at supper, that any one who found money in his house was welcome to keep it. And—and——" but a bigger sob than any that had come before rose up in Mamie's throat and choked her utterance, and it was the voice of the mistress that carried on the story.

"And so you got up this morning, and came downstairs to steal it, I suppose. Well I always have heard that workhouse girls are no good, and now I know it. Give me the half-crown, and take a month's notice from to-day, for I won't keep a thief in my house."

Mamie trembled like a leaf, but already the dreadful despair was lessening and a ray of hope beginning to shine into her heart, for the burden had slipped from her conscience, and

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the words of the old hymn writer were in her case that

"A fault confessed,
Is half redressed."

"If you please, ma'am, when I came to look for it, it was not there," she replied, her voice all the steadier now because of her returning courage.

"Then where is it?" demanded Mrs. Iles in an unbelieving tone.

"If you please, ma'am, I do not know. I thought perhaps you were sorry for me, and had taken it away again," Mamie replied, her voice faltering now because of the unyielding hardness in the tones of Mrs. Iles.

A mocking laugh came from the lady, that cut the culprit like a knife: "A likely story indeed. I am not given to changing my mind in that silly sort of way, as you might have known by this time. Come, give me that half-crown, then hurry breakfast on, for it is getting late."

"Indeed, ma'am, I haven't it," sobbed Mamie, the hope in her heart dying a premature death, as this new perplexity presented itself to torment her with its suspicion and doubt.

"Nonsense, I saw you pick it up, I have been standing here looking at you, and you put

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your hand under the carpet, and took the money out."

"No, oh no, I did not, for the money was not there!" cried Mamie, wringing her hands and beginning to cry because of her inability to refute these charges. Her conscience too, had awakened, and was telling her, that if she had only acted uprightly yesterday, this trouble of to-day could never have been.

Mrs. Iles was thoroughly incensed at this obstinacy on the part of Mamie, or what she regarded as such, for to do her justice, she was quite honest in her belief that Mamie had taken the money. She had placed the coin there with her own hands two days previously, and coming quietly downstairs this morning, had stood in the doorway an unnoticed spectator of the manner in which Mamie had yielded to temptation. And when the girl put her hand in her pocket to feel for her handkerchief, Mrs. Iles supposed her to be secreting the money.

"Do you dare to stand before me, and tell such a fearful lie?" she hissed, the strength and fierceness of her anger, lending a deeper crimson to her face, and a wilder glare to her eyes.

Mamie was frightened; more thoroughly

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scared indeed than she had ever been before. And with a cry, such as a hunted animal might give when brought to bay, she rushed from the room, fleeing upstairs to the sanctuary of her chamber.

It was the worst possible thing she could have done, for it gave colour and strength to the suspicions of her mistress, and turned her theories into certainties straight away.

Upstairs came Mrs. Iles, panting and puffing with the exertion, for the stairs were steep, and she was stout; but she had her duty to do—or what she considered to be such, and it would not be a light thing that turned her from her purpose.

Mamie heard her coming, and cowered into the farthest corner of the room. There was no lock or bolt on the door, there was no other place of refuge to which she could flee and be safe. And besides, that persistent voice in her own breast was telling her she deserved it all, for her weak yielding to temptation.

And oh, how miserable was she, with the sickness and soreness of her own heart on the one hand, and on the other, the approach of her mistress, and the summary punishment that might follow.

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CHAPTER X.

THE FLIGHT.

"NOW, Mamie, turn out your pocket," panted Mrs. Iles, who, arrived at the narrow doorway of that attic bedroom, so filled it with her ample person, that any thoughts of escape in that direction were completely frustrated.

With fingers that trembled very much, Mamie proceeded to obey this mandate, tugging at her cotton frock with nervous haste, in order that she might not further irritate her mistress by delay.

The pocket contained an odd assortment of articles, the stump of a cedar pencil, a grubby, tear-wet pocket-handkerchief, a match box, a crust of bread, a crumpled tract, two or three buttons, and a button-hook. But there was no half-crown, no money of any sort

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indeed, and for the moment Mrs. Iles was non-plussed. Then growing more angry yet, because that things were not turning out as she had expected them to do, she bade Mamie turn her box out also, and the little bag where she kept her best shoes.

The bed was next hauled over, and finally the carpet rolled up, but no money rewarded the efforts of Mrs. Iles.

"You have hidden it somewhere, that is evident, now I will give you one more chance. I am going down to have my breakfast, and if, when I come back, you will not tell me where it is, I shall send for a policeman, who will pretty soon be able to make you open your lips, I guess."

This was merely an empty threat to frighten her, for Mrs. Iles was shrewd enough to know that any magistrate would have held her equally to blame in the matter with the culprit, since she had played the part of tempter to an ignorant and oppressed girl.

But it was no idle threat to Mamie, who cowered in fresh fear at this prospect of being handed over to meet the terrors of the law.

"Oh, ma'am, it wasn't there, it really wasn't. Don't you think that the man who mended the window yesterday might have

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seen it, and picked it up?" wailed the poor child.

"That man stoop to steal a half-crown, why, Mamie, you must be mad to think of such a thing. Why, he is a master-tradesman, and worth a lot of money, he only came himself yesterday because his men were busy elsewhere. No, no, that is not the thief, as you know only too well," and, having delivered this last shot, Mrs. Iles betook herself down-stairs, and Mamie was left alone.

And now, indeed, was she a prey to the anguish of remorse. But for her fatal pride of yesterday, she need not have suffered now. This was the burden of her misery, this, and the fear of the police combined.

Back into her mind flashed all the stories she had ever heard of innocent people haled to prison because of their inability to clear themselves, and she started up in a cold perspiration of horror at her own impotence in this direction. It was her word against that of Mrs. Iles, and who would be likely to believe it?

There was Miss Fillingham. Mamie thought of her with a gasp of relief, for that lady had never doubted her, and she had helped her, too, in the matter of those two half-crowns,

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which, by the way, had been most faithfully worked out, according to the arrangement.

She would run away, and go to Miss Fillingham, who would protect her from falling into the hands of the police, and believe also that she was innocent of the theft.

To resolve was to act. And with hasty fingers Mamie unfastened the buttons of her cotton morning frock, substituting for it her afternoon serge, and putting on her hat and jacket, stole downstairs like the thief she was supposed to be.

Mrs. Iles was getting her breakfast down in the kitchen, and an appetising odour of frying sausages and hot coffee came up to the poor fugitive above, who was desperately hungry, but who dared not linger for food, so desperate seemed the straits in which she found herself.

Softly she unfastened the bolts and chain of the front-door, then opening it gently, crept cautiously forth to the freedom of the street.

Maidenbury was ten long miles from Woolacott, and she did not know the road. She had no money either, for Mrs. Iles had kept that back to pay for her numerous and serious breakages. But she could walk, and she could ask the way, perhaps too her hunger would wear off when she had walked some distance, and there was the crust of bread,

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which she had half unconsciously caught up, and thrust into her pocket, when changing her dress.

The first result of asking her way was that she was wrongly directed, and had to retrace her steps for nearly two miles. At one cottage, where she stopped to inquire about the road, she begged timidly for a slice from the loaf that was standing upon the table, and instead received a bowl of good soup, which she was allowed to eat, sitting by the cottage fire; an unexpected kindness that gave her new energy and hope to press on towards the goal of her journeying.

But despite this help by the way, she was wearily faint and exhausted by the time she breasted the last long rise, and saw the houses of Woolacott in the valley at her feet.

Two miles more of journeying lay before her still, and ere they were passed the short December day was merging into twilight, and the rain that had threatened before, began to come down pretty freely.

In her haste to escape, Mamie had forgotten to change her boots, and was wearing a pair of thin house shoes, one of which had burst open at the side, letting in mud and water, in liberal quantities. This opening, widening with every mile she passed, made her feel presently

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almost as if she were going barefoot over the stones, which cut her foot, until she limped along in such pain that at times she was ready to sink down in the roadway from very weariness.

Darkness had fallen before she reached Rocker's Crescent, and for this she was thankful, since it lessened the chances of recognition from old acquaintances living in that neighbourhood.

That Miss Fillingham would take her in, and give her shelter, she did not doubt, and beyond that she had not gone, the one idea being all her mind could grasp that day.

But she had never once calculated on the chances of not finding the lady at home. And this was precisely what happened to her when she reached the trim little house standing at the end of Rocker's Crescent. Doorstep dirty, path overgrown with weeds, blinds down, and, most certain evidence of all, in one window a big white card bearing the words, "Enquire at the post-office."

Mamie stood gazing at the house in a state of stupefaction. Not at first could she realise all her disappointment meant to her, that must come by degrees.

Meanwhile the rain was coming down briskly, and with a very evident intention of

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keeping at it. Night had come, and she was alone in the world with nowhere to go.

She could not stay at Rocker's Crescent that was certain, she had no money wherewith to buy a shelter either. But, ah—and she gave a gasp of relief at the thought—there was the workhouse!

Strange she had not thought of it before, but her poor bewildered brain had been so tortured and troubled with the weight of the suspicion that had fallen upon her, until it seemed almost as if a sort of mental paralysis had set in.

Following swiftly upon her thought of the workhouse as a shelter came the wonder, would they take her in? Or if they did, would it be merely by way of handing her back to Mrs. Iles, and prospectively to the police on the morrow?

The doubt stayed her steps for a moment, as she turned from Miss Fillingham's door. But her plight had grown so desperate, that it appeared not to matter much what did happen to her now.

It was a mile to the workhouse from Rocker's Crescent, even by the shortest way over the moors and round by Dark Lane, and along this weary mile limped Mamie, her feet bleeding and weary, for the second shoe

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had shared the fate of the first, showing great gaping rents at the sides. Once she sank down on the wet ground, and lay there from sheer exhaustion, but the instinct of self-preservation proved stronger than her fatigue, and dragging herself up by sheer force of will, she crawled onwards again, although now every step was torture.

Passing the corner of the cemetery, where the road turns up the hill to the workhouse, she saw, or fancied she saw, a white shape gliding among the darkness of the trees. Panic, wild and unreasoning, seized her then, and with it came a rallying of her physical powers. Up the hill she raced, heedless now of bruised and bleeding feet, uttering little ejaculations of terror as she went; voiceless cries, these, for the most part, she being too much spent for sound.

On, on, she could see the bright light over the big gate now, but would she reach it ere her strength gave out? Never once had she dared to look behind her, being fearful lest that imaginary wraith should be following in shadowy pursuit.

She reached the gate, put up a trembling hand to pull the bell, and even in the act of doing this, sank unconscious on the ground.

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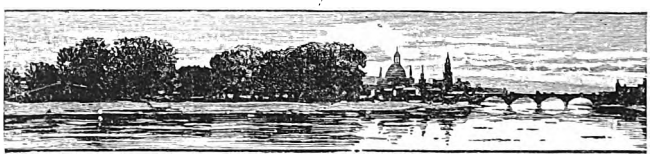

CHAPTER XI.

UNDER A CLOUD.

THE infirm old gate-porter stumped painfully out of his lodge at the great gates.

"Them dratted casuals, I specs," he muttered, wrathfully. He had been in the enjoyment of a placid smoke, which was all but a doze, and to be interrupted like this was tiresome.

To make him even more angry still, when he reached the gates, he saw no one there, and was telling himself in angry tones that he would complain of this kind of thing to the authorities, when, as he turned away he caught sight of something lying on the ground just outside the gates.

"Why, it's a little gal, to be sure!" he exclaimed, quite overcome by astonishment.

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And then stood gazing at the huddled heap, so much amazed by the unexpected sight as to be quite unmindful of the necessity of succouring the unfortunate girl lying on the ground.

Luckily for Mamie, the master chanced to walk down to the lodge at that moment, and catching sight of the old fellow standing peering out through the gate, asked in a sharp tone what he was staring at.

"'Tis a little gal, sir, a-lying in the road, one of they dratted casuals, I specs, and drunk, oh, most amazin' drunk!" exclaimed the old fellow with a pious uplifting of his eyes, until the whites alone were visible, though he was by no means immaculate on the score of sobriety himself.

"Drunk, a child like that, nonsense! Open the gate at once," retorted the master in a sharp tone, stepping forward and peering at the prostrate figure in the road beyond.

"Most amazin' drunk!" chuckled the old fellow to himself, as he stepped back into his lodge, reached down the key from its nail on the wall, and came out with it to unlock the gate.

The master stepped out, and stooping over the recumbent figure, turned the face so that the

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light from the lamp above the gate fell upon it, then after one surprised, half-incredulous look, he cried in astonishment: "Why, bless my soul, if it isn't Mamie Dodds, and, oh, how thin and white she is, poor child!"

"Mamie Dodds, Ikey's daughter, I 'members," mumbled the old gate-keeper, chuckling now over the smartness of his own powers of recollection, "and most amazin' drunk, runs in the fam'ly, so it do."

"Nothing of the sort," retorted the master, in a tone of great asperity, as he stooped and lifted the unconscious form of Mamie in his arms: "you must be an idiot indeed, Jacob, to think the child is drunk; she is ill, and in trouble too, I'm afraid, and such a nice place as she had too. Dear, dear, we are always having trouble with the young ones after they get out in the world, so it seems to me."

This was not all said at the gate, nor did the gate-keeper have the benefit of hearing more than the first few words, for the master was hurrying towards the house with Mamie in his arms.

Quite a chorus of wonderment and ejaculation raged around him as he carried

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her upstairs and laid her down on one of the beds in the sick ward.

"Why, it is Tell-tale-tit, poor little soul, how badly she looks!" cried the assistant-matron, whilst the nurse bustled in with restoratives, elbowing this person to one side, and thrusting that one away.

"Badly indeed! Worked to death, I should say, look at her hands," and the nurse lifted one of Mamie's work-worn hands, to show the others how hard and rough it was.

"And her feet, how they're bleeding, she must have tramped all the way from Maidenbury," the matron said in a shocked tone, lifting up a foot to show the burst shoes, and the wounds the sharp flints of the highway had made.

With true compassion they cared for the poor little wanderer, restoring her to consciousness after a long swoon, administering nourishment, and rolling her in hot blankets for the night.

But her first question when reason returned startled her hearers not a little. "Have the police come for me?" she asked with a terrified look around at the kindly faces bending over her.

"No, no, hush dear," whispered the

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assistant-matron in a warning tone, fearful lest the query might have been heard by the two or three gossiping old convalescents seated in armchairs round the fire.

But Mamie paid no heed, indeed, if anything, her voice was pitched rather higher when she spoke again. "Miss Fillingham will tell them I have said the truth, and then they will not put me in prison."

"Yes, Miss Fillingham shall tell them," replied the nurse, soothingly, and satisfied now that all would be well, Mamie promptly went to sleep, and troubled herself no more.

There was trouble on the faces of the officials, however, as they talked the matter over in undertones, mindful always of the scandal-loving dames seated by the fire. And after some little discussion they separated to their various duties again, whilst the matron, seeking her husband, the master, held a further consultation with him, which resulted in the writing of two letters, one to Mrs. Iles, informing that lady of Mamie's arrival at the workhouse, her terribly exhausted condition, and her frightened query concerning the police, and requesting that if formal complaint had to be made against the girl, that Mrs. Iles would make it convenient to be in attendance

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at the next meeting of the board of guardians, which was fixed to be held on the next day but one. The other letter was sent to Miss Fillingham, and also told the story of Mamie's return, the master pleading, that if it was possible for Miss Fillingham to assist in clearing the poor child's trouble away, she would endeavour to do so.

A long deep sleep was Mamie's that night, broken ever and anon by the nurse, who roused her to take some nourishment, but even that was only partial wakefulness, and she quickly slumbered again. The doctor came in next morning, looked at her poor cut feet, heard the story of her long tramp to Woolacott, and having shaken his head in a somewhat dubious fashion, ordered the nurse to keep her in bed for that day, and then went off to his other patients.

And Mamie was very glad to rest. Surely never before had a workhouse ward appeared so nearly to resemble Paradise, as it did to her that day. It was bliss merely to lie still and let her aching limbs rest, to close her eyes, and listen to the soft crackling of the fire, and the eager mumbling of the toothless old crones who gossiped away, as if their very lives depended on the exercise.

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It was a wet day, with a boisterous, blustering wind which howled and shrieked round the solidly-built walls of the workhouse as though it would like to tear them down in its raging. But the walls were too firm for the wind to shake, and presently it grew tired of the vain attempt, subsiding into peacefulness, as if weary of the strife.

Official opinion was somewhat divided concerning Mamie's story, which she had told at length, upon awaking in the morning. The master and the nurse thought that for once, Tell-tale-tit had been afraid to live up to the old-time nickname, and through sore temptation had fallen into wrong, whilst the matron and the assistant-matron stoutly declared their belief that the child was telling the plain, unvarnished truth; and all four agreed in denouncing the action of Mrs. Iles in the warmest possible terms.

Mamie was quick to realise that there was a difference of opinion regarding the veracity of the tale she told, but this being no more than she had expected, did not trouble her much; and too weary to be anxious concerning the future, she took the wiser course of lying still and thinking nothing about it. She was under a cloud it was true, might be under

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it for a long time indeed, but her Friend, the Strong One, had come back to her: she had been held back from actual theft, and she was delivered from the awful dread of being given up to the police, which last was perhaps the most potent factor in her present peacefulness.

That afternoon a telegram was handed in at the workhouse from Miss Fillingham to the master:

"I am returning late to-day, and will see you to-morrow, stay all proceedings until then, if you can."

"Which I shall not be able to do, unless she is here in good time," remarked the master, as he handed the telegram to his wife. "It is awkward that it should be board-day, it gives so little time."

"Time enough. The girl is innocent, that is plain to see; and it will open the eyes of the guardians perhaps to know how some of our children get treated when they go into situations," retorted the matron in an angry tone. To her this doubting of Mamie's truth, meant nothing less than an aspersion on the morals of the whole workhouse staff, for was she not the child of the workhouse, and had they not trained her in a strict observance of truth and honesty? Certainly Mamie had

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never given them any trouble on these scores, and that was all the more reason for believing her now.

"I wonder what Miss Fillingham can do for her?" queried the master in a meditative tone, staring at the paper, as if that held the solving of the problem.

"Nothing, I expect, only to stand up for her, but that is something you know, especially when it is Miss Fillingham that does it. The guardians will listen to her, and may be willing to give the girl another chance, though I am afraid the running away will tell against her with the gentlemen, they are always sharp down on that. She was foolish not to have stayed, and braved it out."

"She was afraid to, I suppose," replied the master, and then he slipped his spectacles into their case again, restored the case to his pocket, and went off to overlook some alterations which were being made in the piggeries down under the hill.

If his temper was somewhat short that afternoon, and his answers sharper than their wont, it should not be recorded against him as a fault; for he was truly troubled in his mind, concerning the attitude the guardians might take in the affair of Mamie Dodds.

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He was a conscientious man, doing his duty with the rigid exactitude of a righteous man, but when any of the workhouse children turned out badly, it always seemed to him that he must have slurred over something somewhere, or the disaster could not have happened.

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CHAPTER XII.

TRUTH TRIUMPHANT.

THERE was an air of subdued excitement prevailing throughout the workhouse, which penetrated even to the old men's day-room, where the matter of Mamie Dodds was discussed in a reek of blue tobacco smoke, and old Matty Rossiter, who was of a sporting turn of mind, offered even odds all round on Mamie. No one took it up, however, since none of them had any money to gamble with, and a haziness existed in their minds also as to exactly what "even odds" might mean, the term, to their unenlightened minds, having something mysteriously paradoxical about it.

The old women were not a whit less eager in discussing the affair, and their beloved tea-pots suffered neglect, whilst they sat with their heads together wondering what the gentlemen in the board-room would decide in the case of Mamie *versus* Mrs. Iles.

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If any such wonder crossed the mind of Mrs. Iles herself that morning as she journeyed towards Woolacott, she dismissed it with a snort of disgust, and an impatient toss of her head. To suggest any doubt in the matter was belittling to her dignity, of course the guardians without one dissentient voice would applaud her for her firmness in the matter, would most likely restore the half-crown Mamie had stolen, and then shut the wretched little deceiver up for fourteen days or so on a simple diet of bread and water.

Oh, yes, Mrs. Iles felt quite certain in her mind about the result, as she stepped from the train on to the platform of the Woolacott station, and sailed out towards the station entrance in all the bravery of sparkling jet fringes, and a very smart bonnet.

Even the cabman was impressed by the imposing grandeur of her appearance, and supposing her to be some titled personage, a countess at the very least, promptly demanded just double his ordinary fare, and got it too, which surprised him not a little, for even titled personages have a care to their purse strings sometimes. But then Mrs. Iles was labouring under the delusion that she could call upon the Woolacott guardians to

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reimburse her for travelling expenses, and hence did not trouble about the size of the fare.

The master received her with a very grave face, the board would listen to her later on, he said, when the ordinary business was over, meanwhile he would show her a room where she might wait.

"Wait indeed!" retorted Mrs. Iles, incensed already by the unsympathetic gravity of his countenance, "I may lose my train if I have to wait, and go without luncheon into the bargain, for there is no refreshment room in that barbarous hole of a station."

"Perhaps you would like some refreshment here, the guardians who drive in from a distance have bread and cheese from the stores, I could bring you some if you would care for it?" the master queried with polite hospitality.

But Mrs. Iles declined, having a mind above such homely fare, and gathering her skirts about her with quite a regal air, sat down to await the pleasure of the board.

It was a rather tardy pleasure that morning, and Mrs. Iles was thinking ruefully of what that waiting cab would cost her, did the guardians decline to pay her expenses, when the door opened, and a lady came in, who

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took a chair on the other side of the fire, and sat down to wait also.

"I shall be very glad when those tiresome guardians are ready to see me," Mrs. Iles said presently in an impatient tone.

"So shall I," rejoined the other, who was Miss Fillingham. "It seems to waste one's day so much to have to wait, does it not?"

"Yes, indeed!" and with such a good opening at hand, Mrs. Iles plunged straightway into the story of her wrongs, and of the villainy of Mamie Dodds.

The same story was being told at that moment in the board-room, but there the narrator was Mamie herself.

Influenced perhaps by the master's private version of the affair, the chairman had decided to interview Mamie before seeing Mrs. Iles.

Dressed once more in workhouse garb, and wearing a pair of roomy list slippers lent her by the nurse, for her feet were not yet healed sufficiently for the wearing of any more unyielding foot-gear, Mamie advanced limping up the board-room, and made her reverence to the gentleman in the chair.

The action reminded him of that other time when Mamie had appeared before him,

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years ago, and by her uncompromising truthfulness, received W. H. for her father instead of the out-relief for which she had come to plead.

The remembrance softened his heart towards her, it even made him feel that since she had told the truth then, so probably she would tell it now.

Ordering her to sit down, for it was easy to see how weak she was, he told her to tell the board how it was she had come to be in such disgrace.

There was a certain thrill of belief in her, in his tone, despite the quiet coldness of his face, that inspired Mamie with the courage that comes from hope. And she told her story without fear, glossing over nothing, nor omitting a detail of her own temptation to theft.

The benevolent gentleman, who appeared to be a fixture on the board, blew his nose so violently when Mamie told how she had tried to steal the half-crown and found it gone, that the chairman frowned until his back eye-brows met across his face, while he pounded on the table with his little wooden hammer for silence in the room.

The confession was over at last, and with

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bowed head and heaving breast Mamie sat still in her place, waiting for judgment to be passed upon her.

But none came—yet. The chairman asked her if she would be willing to repeat her statement in the presence of her late employer, to which she gave an unhesitating, Yes. Then he asked the gentlemen of the board if they would like to put any questions to her, upon which a cross-looking personage at the far end of the table inquired in a loud voice if her feet were very sore.

As this sort of query was irrelevant to the business in hand, Mamie was told that she might leave the room, which she did thankfully enough.

When she had gone the chairman made a little speech, which in some curious manner proved productive of not a little coughing and nose-blowing among the personages round the table, as he touched on Mamie's untarnished record for truthfulness in the past, bringing several anecdotes to illustrate his remarks, for which, it is needless to state, he was indebted to Miss Fillingham, who had been doing her best that morning to convert him to her own belief in Mamie's rectitude.

"Now, I put it to you, gentlemen," he said,

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in conclusion, "do you think it probable that Mamie Dodds stole that money?"

A perfect chorus of Noes burst from the listeners, but the chairman was not satisfied yet.

"Will those of you who believe her innocent, kindly hold up your right hands?" he asked, whereupon every gentleman's hand shot into the air, whilst the cross-looking personage waved both arms wildly aloft, and shouted hurrah, for which breach of board-room decorum he was promptly snubbed by the chairman.

The benevolent gentleman cried undisguisedly behind his handkerchief like a woman, and for about two minutes the whole room appeared in a condition of complete disorganization.

The chairman was the first to recover himself, and rubbing his hands together, he remarked with the air of a man who expects to enjoy himself: "And now we will hear what Mrs. Iles has to say upon the matter."

Apparently she intended to say a great deal when she first came in, but probably the saying proved more fatiguing than she had anticipated, or it may be she found her audience unsympathetic, for certainly her details were not nearly so ample, nor her

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denunciations of Mamie half so emphatic as when she had rehearsed her eloquence for Miss Fillingham's benefit in the waiting-room.

Just as she was coming to a lame conclusion, there was a knock at the board-room door, and the porter entered with a telegram for Mrs. Iles.

Asking permission of the chairman to open it, she tore the envelope, and took out the paper it contained.

Once she read it, then twice, even perusing it the third time, as if doubting the evidence of her own eyes, after which she gave vent to a thin shriek of such unqualified dismay, that the eyes of all in the room were bent upon her, to discover the cause of her trepidation.

"I trust, madam, that you have had no ill news?" queried the chairman, not so much, if the truth must be told, from politeness, as from a desire to end the unusually long sitting, to which the board seemed doomed that morning.

"If it had only come half an hour earlier,—read it to them," she gasped, waving the paper in the direction of the amazed guardians, and then stuffing it in the hands of the chairman.

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And read it he did, the merciless clearness of his decisive voice cutting away—for the time being—the last remaining shreds of Mrs. Iles's self-respect.

It was from Mr. Iles, and ran as follows: "I have returned, and learned your errand to Woolacott; don't make a stupid of yourself, I took the half-crown."

The chairman looked severe, one irrepressible guardian burst into a hoarse guffaw, which he tried to stifle in his handkerchief, whereupon ensued a series of convulsive choking noises that were sufficiently alarming to the listeners, whilst Mrs. Iles leaned back in her chair, and displayed strong symptoms of fainting.

The situation was becoming tragic, and a nervous gentleman knocked a tumbler of water over among the papers on the table, he was wondering how they would manage to carry the portly form of the discomfited lady downstairs if she actually should faint.

"Am I to understand from this, that you have no charge to bring against the girl, Mamie Dodds?" demanded the chairman, in a tone so frigid, it acted on Mrs. Iles like a dash of cold water, and restored her forthwith.

"I have no charge," she retorted faintly.

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But the chairman was not disposed to spare her, he had seen the fragments of the shoes in which poor Mamie had tramped to Woolacott, he had seen the wounds on her feet, and, more than all, he had her version of the temptation which had so nearly been her downfall, and having a merciless strain in his composition, he proceeded to give Mrs. Iles the very worst quarter of an hour that it had perhaps ever been her lot to endure.

Whether it had a lasting influence for good on her character may be doubted, though the immediate results were all that could be desired, and bore eloquent testimony to the fact that she had a shred of good-heartedness buried somewhere down under the dominant selfishness of her ordinary behaviour. Five pounds she promised for the poor-box, a like sum to be paid by her into the post-office savings bank for Mamie herself, and a written retraction of the charge of theft. And when he had wrung this much out of her, the chairman smiled, and let her go.

"It is the triumph of truth," he said, turning to his fellow-guardians, as they were beginning to disperse. "If the girl had not had that good record in the past, we should not have believed her to-day. It was pitting

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a pauper against plenty, and the pauper won. Ah, yes, it pays to be honest, even in a thieving world like this."

* * * * *

Mamie's future was settled for her the very next week. But not even in her wildest flights of fancy had she painted a picture so full of bliss. She was to live with Miss Fillingham, not in the capacity of a domestic servant, but as a daughter beloved. A chance of education was to be given her, and an opportunity of self-culture beyond aught that she had ever dreamed of.

And strangely enough no one was jealous of her good fortune, for had she not earned it by the quiet persistency with which she had worn that glittering jewel of truth?

"Yes, it pays to be truthful," the assistant-matron said musingly when she heard the news.

But Mamie, to whom the remark was made, remained silent. She was thinking of the Strong One who had helped her, and had restrained her by His grace, when temptation had well-nigh encompassed her in the toils of committed sin.

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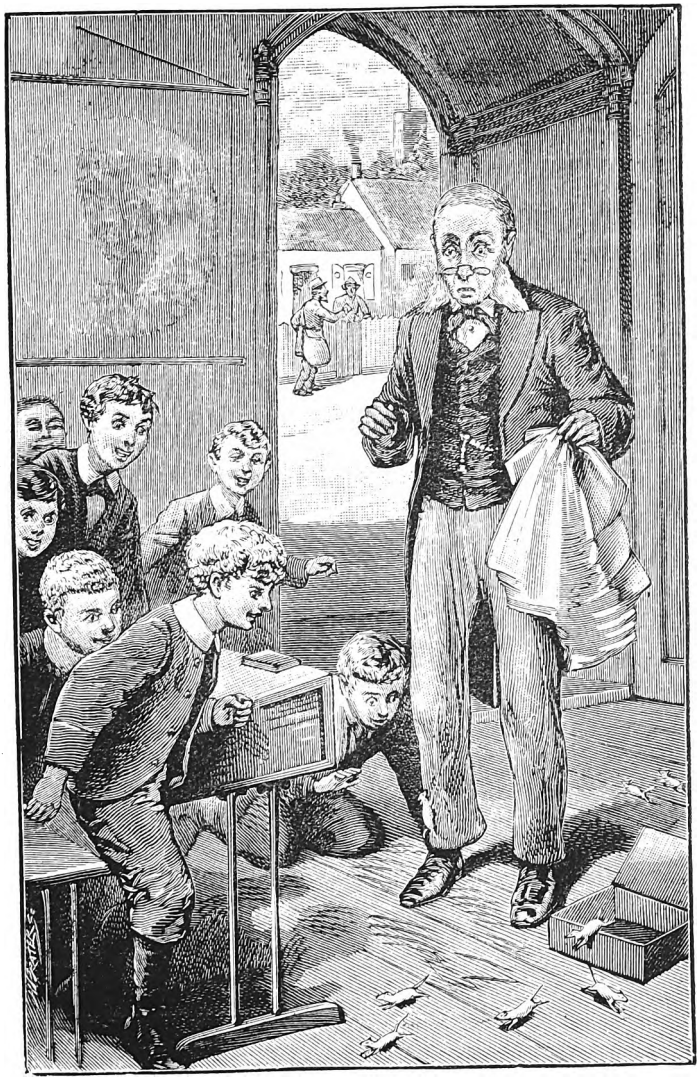

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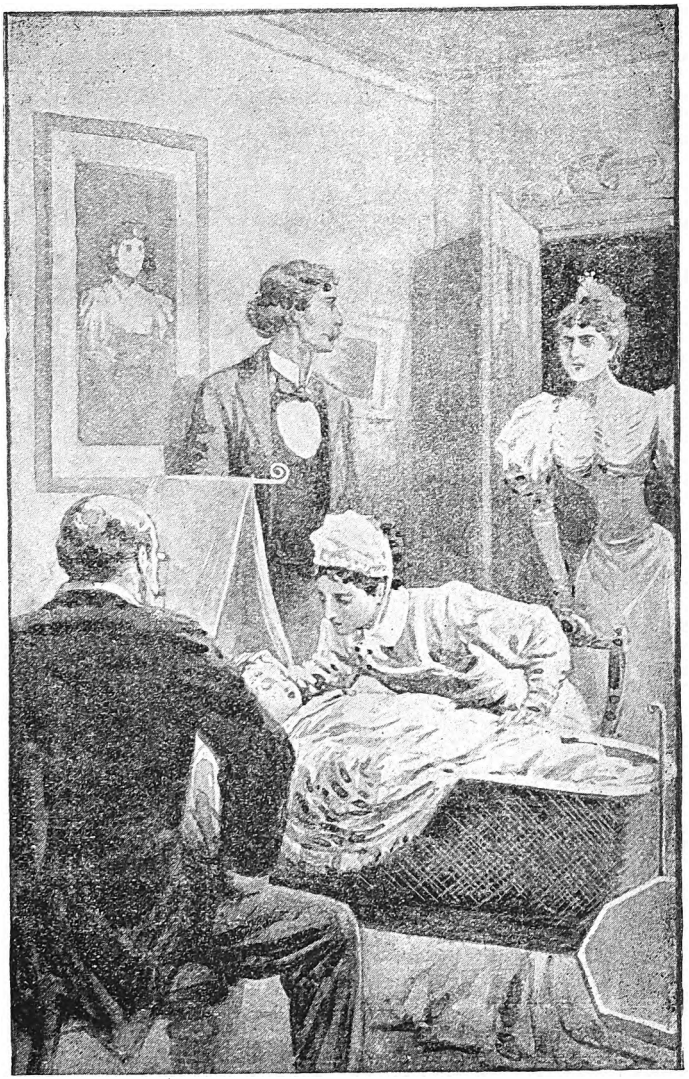

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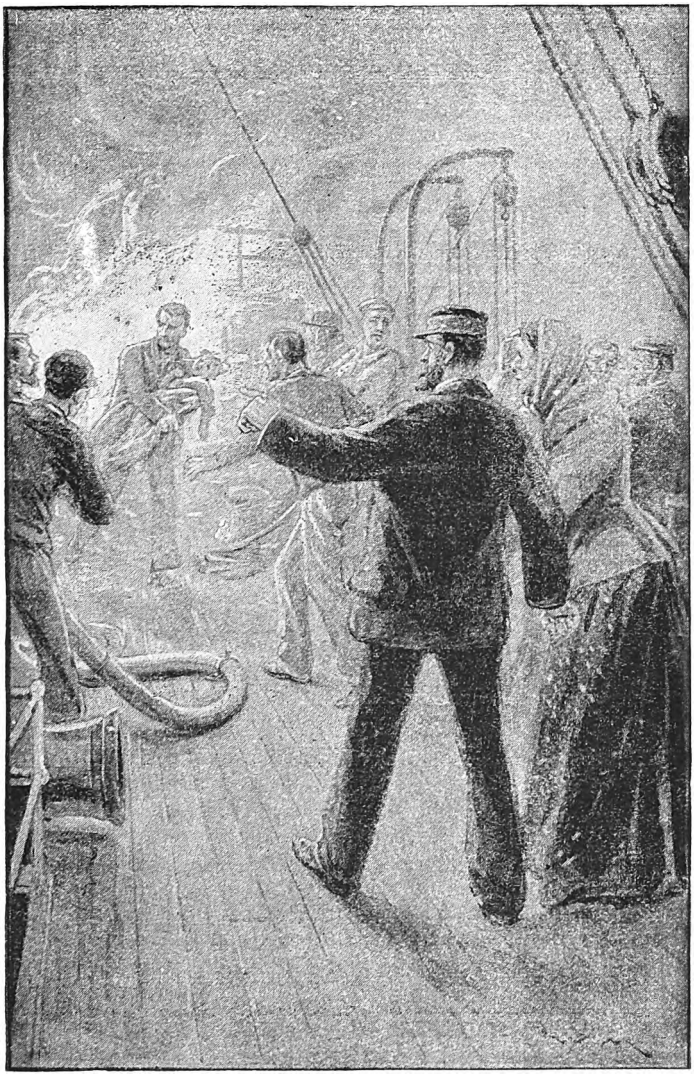

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